Fallout: Chrysalis

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Fallout: Chrysalis

by dumn_and_dunmer

Summary

What if HANNIBAL, but FALLOUT?????

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

This place could use a good Roomba

Will had killed exactly twelve people by his own count since he had left the vault. That is to say, he gave himself no illusions on the nature of the killings. There was no “that didn’t count because it was self-defense,” bullshit, and certainly no “if I hadn’t killed her, she would have killed me” nonsense.

No, a kill counted as a kill. Being that the other combatants were dead, he had no one to lie to but himself, and he was very clear on the consequences of his actions. Not that there would be any kind of retribution from any third party. This outside world seemed to function under old west principles, vigilante justice (if you could call it justice), and private sectors you could hire to finish arguments by fighting other private sectors hired by the person you were having the argument with.

It was all very confusing to him, and he was trying so hard to keep his head down.

Also (it was to say), he was telling himself he had “left” the vault, because what had actually happened was terrifying, traumatic, and completely out of his control. He had told himself this so many times he had even accidentally made a little tune to go along with the words inside his head when he recited it.

A nagging discordant whisper would sometimes bleed through the tune, however, jolting him out of a shallow and fretful doze, as he lay under whatever random burned out car shell or drainage ditch he was curled up in for the night.

The whisper would ask him what else had been out of his control that night. What had been in self-defense and what had been something else.

The whisper would ask him the exact number of people he had killed *before he had “left” the vault.*

He was trying and failing to not acknowledge this blatant contradiction of privately defined self-righteousness as he stood and shivered with everyone else crowded on the platform awaiting the terrifyingly shoddy metal bridge to be swung out over the water separating the shore from the entrance to Rivet City.

The first time Will had laid eyes on the massive aircraft carrier that served as one of the biggest and safest human populated communities in the wasteland, he had nearly forgotten where and who he was for a moment. It was a strange feeling.

It had been late evening, and he had just rounded the corner of the nondescript building he had used to circumvent the small band of traveling merchants he didn’t want to talk to and then suddenly he had been dwarfed by a black castle, its wings and spires bejeweled generously with lanterns and torches.

He had heard of how beautiful Rivet City had been from several people, but he hadn’t expected it. Nothing he had seen so far in this dusty beige and blue gray rock garden had

been anything close to what he could consider beautiful.

The color had seemed to be drained out of every surface out here, and Will had at first assumed it must have been residual radiation bleaching the bright obnoxious paint jobs on the innumerable ruins of cars and buildings but after noticing his own bright blue and yellow jumpsuit starting to fade after only a few weeks on the outside, he was convinced the sheer overwhelming anguish and despair of having to simply exist was, in general, more than enough to knock the color out of anything.

Rivet City had taken his breath away in the few minutes it took him to get close enough to see the reality of things. It was in fact rusty and looked to be barely holding onto cohesion. He saw the glittering candles and sconces were merely holes in the hull that let the sick yellow glow of the lights inside shine through.

Then his smug self-assured assessment of how bleakly crap everything was came rushing back in to warm his pessimistic soul. It was almost a comfort. And then he felt something else tug at him. It was only for a few minutes but it almost felt like he had been here before.

No, not just here, but in Rivet City.

It came on the strange dream-logic surety you experience during déjà vu, but instead of the clarity returning after a few moments like it normally would, the feeling persisted. In fact it seemed to get stronger as he approached the great ship, and he suddenly knew he needed to hurry, because the bridge was being recalled soon, and he would not be able to board for lodging and food til tomorrow morning at precisely 8am. Frank closed the grill in about an hour and there was likely going to be nowhere to sit. Shauna was going to be pissed at him if he missed the bridge again and he hadn't brought a lot of caps back in the first place. If her dad thought he wasn't taking care of her well enough...

Wait...who? Frank? Shauna? Bridge? What bridge? Then the strange feelings and thoughts fell out of him as suddenly as if an artery had been slashed. He stood, disoriented for a few beats, scared to move in any which way and hoping he wasn't having his first real actual mental breakdown, which he figured he was past due for.

Then something exploded in the middle distance to the north and he had bolted up the ramp for the bridge and managed to make it into the main foyer at least, but was informed by a guard that the lodgings were full and the galley was at maximum capacity.

He hunkered down uncomfortably in the crowded room used for refugee overflow but managed to buy half a sandwich off a positively ancient matronly woman who only communicated in nods and grunts and had feathers and animal bones sewn into her dirty hooded shawl. She seemed to sense Will's badly disguised shaking terror and gave him an encouraging smile that made him chastise himself on his opinions of what could be considered beauty out here.

The next morning when he awoke the old woman was already gone, and the caps he had bought the half sandwich with were hidden neatly in the toes of his boots. His boots that were still on.

The rest of the morning had been confusing and exhausting, most of it spent trying to maneuver his way around the shockingly bustling cargo bay, once used to hold the ship's precious machines of war, now being used as a Mecca of trade, a marketplace where you could buy and sell almost anything, the stalls and housing cobbled together from whatever had once been transported within.

He was on the verge of tears by noon, having been jostled constantly while simply trying to walk from one stall to the next in the crushingly massive and cacophonous open space.

On the bright side, his intuition on what parts where the most valuable to scavenge from the busted robots he had found in a slag heap had been proven very correct, and he now had enough caps to feel comfortable about buying a properly cooked meal from the galley.

He was slightly relieved to find the man in charge was not a Frank, but instead a jovial man named Gary. He ordered two meat pies (don't think about it, Will told himself), and allowed himself the luxury of considering that he was just mentally fatigued last night, his brain firing off a waking dream that was just lucky at guessing very specific details.

He had sat in a corner of the market reserved for old tires instead of the dining area (because it seemed more private and quiet) and waited while eating one of the pies.

He grimaced down at it briefly. Well, it was certainly something warm at least. He thought bitterly of the salads you could order from the vault cafeteria that he had resented at the time because the nutritionalist encouraged them militantly. Right now he'd be grateful for a fistful of croutons with diet ranch dressing dumped on top.

Suddenly spotting what he was watching for, he reluctantly left the safety of his tire fort and fought his way to the little old woman he had met the previous night, and deftly slipped the extra meat pie into her hand so smoothly that it took her a few moments to realize it was there.

She glanced back, her curious and heartbreakingly hopeful face seemingly carved out of stone. She caught sight of Will, now moving away with the opposite stream of shuffling people and beamed at him. He winked at her and finally returned her smile from last night, saluted as cheerfully as he could, and went off in search of badly needed medical supplies.

He had always looked for her on his return trips to Rivet City and had even bravely asked Gary if he had seen her, but so far no luck.

As he stood here now, nearly a month later, he looked fleetingly among the faces of his fellow scavengers, hoping to see her. There were about twenty or so petitioners in total this morning, more than usual, but none of them owned the only face he had willingly wanted to see.

He was surprised to see several faces he did recognize though, and not just from Rivet City. He had shared campfires and shelters with a few of them, but he had no desire to befriend any of them. A man he thought was named Fred or Frank waved at him but he pretended he hadn't seen.

Just as everyone was starting to get restless, the gate guard signaled for the bridge to be swung out, and Will once again snuffed the flame of fear he felt kindle every time he had to cross the infuriatingly long rickety sheet metal slab that they called the bridge.

It was normally his habit to wait until everyone else had crossed, making a show of staying back to adjust and inventory his loot or fuss at the heavy gray cloak that now covered his ridiculous jumpsuit before crossing so he didn't appear afraid of the bridge collapsing under everyone's combined weight. You know, like a sane person would.

Today however, he started across with everyone else, as he was in a bit of a hurry to conclude his business and get back to the goldmine of electronic equipment he had uncovered while scavving a costume and party shop on the east side of the city that rented out fantastical animatronic party decorations. He had gotten quite a good haul from it already, but couldn't carry everything he found in his bulky leather bag in one trip.

As he walked, idly wondering what to order from Gary's for breakfast, he happened to look down and to his left, at a small alcove on the lower deck that seemed to be used for patients of the clinic (located somewhere in the north side of the main ship) to get some air and sunlight while convalescing. He had seen them down there sometimes, sitting in wheelchairs or being assisted by nurses as they slowly inched their way along the only wall on the ship not seemingly coated in rust.

Presently, as his glance drifted downward, he felt himself jolt internally as it landed squarely into eye contact with a man casually leaning forward on the railing, apparently halted in the act of folding a piece of paper in his hands.

Will slowly came to a stop now, enraptured and unnerved by the sight. The man's face looked full of edges and shadow here in the morning gloom, his clean sandy hair casually and flawlessly swept back from his temple, some stray locks artfully dancing on the slight breeze. The man was also wearing the most improbable outfit: a suit that was slightly frayed and worn in some places, but that could still easily be considered pristine by current wasteland standards. It was also a deep, dark red.

Will managed to keep his jaw from dropping but still must have looked rather bemused because the man's face slowly bloomed into a enigmatic smile that sent a crawling sensation up the back of his neck and head.

Suddenly the moment was broken as Will was shoved roughly from behind with a bark to move it along already. Will whipped around instinctively and faced a man who was slightly taller than him but had far less teeth.

"Forget how to switch directions when you're walking, asshole?!" Will snarled at him.

"At least I know how to walk, you fucking tent boy, or do you reckon you'd be better at swimming?" The man spat as he stepped closer to Will's face.

Will, for whatever reason, was suddenly not very afraid of any of the things a mind you shouldn't worry about should be afraid of.

In fact, he was already calculating how much damage he could do to the man before they both hit the water far, far below, because Will's hand had reflexively and surreptitiously gripped a strap of the man's gear that looped around his bloated torso and Will knew if he was going over, the man was going to be coming too.

The man hadn't realized this yet and was backing Will up to the criminally ineffective railing when a guard spotted the commotion and barked at them to break it up or they would face a month's ban from the ship.

The man halted just short of possibly killing them both and Will realized he himself was grinning maniacally in the face of death as well as the man who only had five teeth and even fewer IQ points.

The man slowly backed up and Will took an immense sick pleasure in the face he made when he realized Will's hand was still entangled in the strap to his satchel. Will held on for a moment longer to emphasize his point and then abruptly snapped back his hand like he was plucking at a guitar cord.

The guard barked out a second warning and the Man With No Teeth stalked away jerkily and Will watched as he carved a path through the crowd. The crowd that was now all standing in place gaping at Will.

He shifted uncomfortably.

"Uh...sorry," he mumbled to the pale faces regarding him with curiosity and caution.

"He started it," he added lamely.

From somewhere in the crowd, someone burped, but still nobody moved.

"Ok...I'm...uh...going in now..." Will suggested, and finally everyone started stirring from their impromptu field study and turned disappointedly towards the main entrance when he did.

Will almost expected the man in the red suit to be gone when he looked down again, a figment of his imagination, or maybe even an overly dramatic omen of death.

But to his surprise, not only was he still there, he hadn't even changed his position, his body relaxed against the metal railing, his graceful, long arms supporting his entire upper half, his hands, still holding the paper, suspended out over the icy black water below.

He was seemingly similarly unbothered by both the fact that he had almost watched two men plummet to their probable death, and that he himself could easily end up in the water if he wasn't more cautious about what he leaned on, seeing as how most of the railing was currently being held together by what appeared to be coat hangers, random military equipment, and what Will suspected was an actual helicopter rotary blade.

The man ~~commanded~~ held his gaze for a moment longer, something Will was distantly aware was rare for him, and then the spell was broken, Red Suit returning his attention to the paper

he was now resuming the strangely polite folding of. His soft smile lingered thoughtfully as his hands worked in strange insect-like precision and speed.

So, Will thought as he continued on through the porthole to the marketplace. A doctor, not a patient. He reminded himself he shouldn't be judging someone else's mental state based on flamboyant clothing alone. He tugged self-consciously at the ripped collar of his own poison dart frog colored pajama suit. He resolved himself to buy something more inconspicuous to wear if his haul payed off as well as he hoped it would.

He tried to keep his mind busy and focused on making sure the shifty tech vendors gave him his deserved payout for his wares, and for the most part, he was immensely proud of himself. He felt like he was finally starting to understand this place and the poor souls in it despite still being terrified every waking (and dreaming) moment.

However, something nagged at him as he wove and shimmied through the masses to the galley where he sat and ordered a late breakfast of eggs on toast. It hovered over him like a ghost image and every time he shifted the memory this way and that, it made his suspicions worse.

Will fancied he had a secret talent (that was in fact a skill he was still actively honing, unbeknownst to him), in that he was able to read people very effectively, so accurately in fact, he had been able to use it to get what he had needed from people who would have otherwise possibly robbed him. He had evaded death in this way countless times, too.

Take Toothpaste Ad earlier for instance. Will knew he was serious as a heart attack about his threat to toss him over into the river. If the guard hadn't called out, they both would have been soup ingredients for the mirelurks right now.

He admitted he had been wrong on a couple of occasions (his left shoulder still had a scar on it from just such a miscalculation), but of this instance he was sure. When the man had smiled at him at first, it was seemingly out of amusement. As if he had for a split second spotted a cloud in the temperamental sky that had coalesced itself into a rude shape.

Will was somewhat used to this look, he had seen it every time he had asked a local what he thought had been an innocent and honest question. But when he had turned back from his little tango with the tooth fairy, Red's face had been slightly different. The more Will studied it in his mind's eye, the more defined his conclusions were becoming, and now he was getting a deeply uneasy feeling in his stomach that was shoving his eggs of indeterminate origins around insolently.

The look on the man's face could not have been more clearly one of approval.

He really do be waxing poetic, doe

Chapter Summary

Haaaaave you met Hannibal?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A patient had exploded in one of the medical bays of the clinic. Or more specifically, his head had exploded. Dr. Hannibal Lecter didn't yet know the specifics but he thought it all sounded rather intriguing.

It was how it came to be that he was now covering for Dr. Harp this morning during the hour or so the elderly and infirm were allowed to partake in "outdoor activities" on days when the weather would permit it.

Today was just such a day that nobody seemed likely to freeze to death immediately or inhale something caustic from the upsweeping wind, so here he was, and he reveled in his good luck. The air still held a keen chill to it, but it was rapidly warming with the rising of the sun to the east.

The air was clear and the normally overcast sky was now what you could almost optimistically call "partly cloudy."

Perhaps that was what had resulted in so many visitors waiting in the queue for the bridge this morning. He counted twenty three hopefuls huddled together across the deep chasm that served as a sad example of a moat to the main ship.

He enjoyed being able to watch the bridge being extended, as he was rarely afforded the chance anymore. Almost all of his morning business was conducted inside; even his predawn run was carried out in the feebly lit gym down by the series of rooms that served as a hotel for guests and residents alike.

He longed to be free out in the wastelands again, on one of his "*sabbaticals*" as the nurses and security guards liked to call them. His patients and fellow doctors called them "*suicide missions*" and Jimmy charmingly referred to them as "*radiation poisoning roulette*."

Right now, however, it just wasn't feasible for him to take off for a week or two, come back a bit scratched up and sore, sleep for two days and then have to acclimate himself back to the normal gentle life he had made for himself here. It irked him, to be quite honest.

He was brooding on this and glowering darkly at the piece of paper he was folding presently when he heard the groaning hydraulics that controlled the bridge overhead come to life with a

violent shake. Everyone on the deck behind him either covered their ears in annoyance or stopped what they were doing to watch.

Now Hannibal got to play one of his favorite games, one of the only ones he was allowed outside of his office on this glorified floating cheese grater. The bridge finally lined up with the platform across the way and the restless and groggy crowd started across in unison.

He remembered when the guards cared enough to enforce an orderly, evenly dispersed queue to cut down on mass weight concentration, but they gave that up long ago because people were, for the most part, stupid self absorbed herd animals, and would rather kill themselves and everyone around them rather than listen to what good intentioned people were saying just so they could say they got to the door first.

Out of the twenty three people that had either arrived early this morning or had missed the bridge last night, he immediately recognized twenty of them. The other three were two men and a rather tall figure in a gas mask and hood.

He bookmarked the hooded figure in his mind as the most fascinating and started to work on the easier targets first.

A woman named Terra he had treated for shock once was limping badly on her right side, grimacing every time she was mid stride, meaning it was her hip that was injured, not her leg or foot. Boring.

Another woman named Pippy who had just given birth to child a month ago was staring blankly ahead, empty handed and wavering. A pity, thought Hannibal, but unfortunately common. Two brothers named Tak and Porky were very ill looking indeed, most likely poisoned by either radiation, chems, or both, as they were both users. Banal.

The young male prostitute that went by Lotus was back, and he looked to be a more interesting challenge. He was sporting a black eye, the top of one ear was missing a chunk, he had one half of his jacket sleeve sewn back on where it had been ripped, and his pants had been soaked in blood on the front and had been only halfheartedly washed. His knuckles were a bloody swollen mess.

He glanced over at Hannibal, caught his eye, beamed insanely, and offered him a enthusiastic thumbs up. This all but confirmed his suspicion on what had happened once again; someone had refused to pay him so he had killed them.

Hannibal smiled back good-naturedly and shook his head in mock admonishment. *Naughty, naughty boy*, he seemed to say. Lotus stuck his tongue between his top teeth and lower lip and waggled his eyebrows salaciously. He was rather fond of Lotus.

He inventoried everyone else quickly (Hob is drunk, Milly is recovering from yet another sex robot mishap, Broker was a solid pillar of walking arthritis, Tank was pregnant), hoping to get as much of a read as possible from the tall mysterious stranger before he didn't have the chance anymore.

And then quite suddenly all thoughts of said entity flew from his mind like a flock of blackbirds, blotted out by what he was sure was going to be the highlight of his day.

Walking in tandem with everyone else, but altogether wholly apart, was a youngish man with wild hair and a patchy beard he had obviously tried to maintain himself but had no access to the proper equipment. He looked tired, but not lost, and only a little afraid.

All of that was apparent, but not nearly as apparent as the one thing that was setting him far apart from the dispassionate riffraff rapidly blurring behind him.

Whereas everyone else was permanently stooped over in a world weary, beaten-down-and-broken sort of shuffle, this man walked with the proper straight-backed easy flow of someone that had not been influenced by the wastes for as long as everyone else. More specifically, at all.

This man was not, as they say, from around here.
And even more, what was currently wrapped around this hardly influenced frame...

Hannibal's interest was officially peaked as he eyed the shabby dark cloak.

Then something spectacular happened.

Just as his newest acquisition was nearing the middle of the bridge, the sun broke magnificently out from behind a building, illuminating everyone on the catwalk, in particular the enthralling young man, and caused the vaporous curls and tendrils of steam rising from the warm mass of people to shimmer and glow, giving a holy aura to the scene.

The young man looked down at him, and as he stopped walking, his head and shoulders aligned with the large sculpture behind him on the shore perfectly, the top arch of a bronze circle completing the perfect corona.

What Hannibal was looking at was a spitting image of a holy religious icon, possibly one still locked away behind a vault door in an old world monastery somewhere because it was far too precious for any mere mortal to look at.

It was only for a moment, but it was enough for Hannibal. He cemented and sealed it into its own alcove in his mind, anchored in, never to be removed. He would visit many times this day alone.

Then the younger man's eyes narrowed, his lips parted, and a look of pure indignation flooded his face, signaling that he must have finally registered Hannibal's favorite suit. He was suddenly overwhelmed with satisfaction that he had worn it today, because for one, he knew he looked good in it, and two, he was getting to see the dismay on this man's face in perfect lighting and angle.

And then a man known hilariously as Cumtick shoved the impromptu saint from behind and they started immediately snarling at each other like dogs. Hannibal was immensely pleased to see that the shorter man didn't balk for one second at the threat from the taller, stouter one.

But then again, Hannibal hadn't expected him to.
Hannibal also hadn't expected him to lash out his hand like a snake and wrap the other man's gear around his hand in one fluid movement that was so fast he had barely caught it himself.

Cumtick hadn't seen or felt it at all, and was about to very likely have that realization as his final thought, when a gate guard finally finished his sudoku puzzle and called out a ban warning that seemed to bring Cumtick to his meager senses.

And then Hannibal saw something that engorged the IV bag that pumped out his most favorite of drugs for his starved junkie brain: the feeling of Being Right.

The sleeve on the arm of the Patron Saint of Mongooses was a bright blue, lined with an unmistakable yellow lined pattern. Something on the cuff glittered in the morning light, a shiny gold accent that was in the barely tarnished state of a rough few months maybe, but not the lifeless dull decay of sitting in a shop somewhere for decades, waiting for someone desperate to buy it.

This subject had come out of a vault. And very recently.

He wondered if the expedition had been a smooth one or if there was a nasty exit wound to contend with. He was a doctor after all.

Meanwhile, Cumtick soon realized what had almost just happened: his face drained of color and he looked on the verge of risking an execution for the chance to knock the little shit (who had just now sassily plucked his purse strap like a taut piano wire) right into the river.

He turned however, possibly making a mental rain check, and shoved his way rudely through the frightened crowd.

Hannibal couldn't see the young man's face, but he wished that he could, because a few people in the crowd were seemingly becoming more alarmed by the second.

He then spoke a few low words and started for the entrance. Lotus was watching him hungrily. He would have to find some way to warn the man about Lotus, Hannibal resigned to himself.

Happily, he was granted one more brief visage of the Saint's morose face and jewel bright eyes as he watched him slowly walk the rest of the bridge, and he considered himself satisfied for now. He averted his gaze to show the man he was free to go, and a few seconds later, the whole mob was out of sight.

He returned his attention to the little paper plane he had been working on before all the excitement interrupted him. He hummed while he finished, making sure every crease and angle was perfectly aligned.

When he was done, it looked like some expensive origami art piece that belonged in the private collection of a warlord or king.

He cocked his head to the side in admiration and turned to hand it to the small bright eyed girl that had been huddling close behind him, hiding from the sun and the bitterly cold wind, clinging to his pant leg and cursing under her breath.

“Here, my lady, your steed. Please don’t throw it into any more ventilation fans, or you’ll possibly blow up the whole ship, and that could get us both into trouble.”

The little girl snatched it out of his hand, put her hands on her hips, and stomped her foot angrily.

“It’s not like I’m *aiming* for the fans, Hannibal, they get sucked in! It’s an air *intake* fan! It *intakes*!” The little girl who insisted on being called Princess Plasma Cannon (or Princess for short) by almost everyone was only seven by Hannibal’s guess, but she was fiercely intelligent and precocious.

He had rescued her himself on one of his sabbaticals, and she had refused to leave his side ever since. He would call her his assistant, sometimes jokingly, sometimes seriously. No matter the context, she would positively radiate with pride every time.

“Abigail?” Hannibal said suddenly, as if he’d had a sudden idea. She sniffed snottily in response because she knew it annoyed him. He was the only person who called her that.

“Those two gentlemen that had the fight on the bridge just now. I would like you to find out everything you can about the shorter of the two. For me.” He added in an obvious tactic that had not failed him yet.

“You mean the *hairy* one?” She trilled loudly, her voice cracking prettily from youth.

“Yes, but don’t call him that, please. At least not to his face.” He knew the young girl well and knew asking her to be too polite was unreasonable and frankly unrealistic.

She regarded him shrewdly and sniffed again. Hannibal smiled patiently and waited.

“My mercenary fee for espionage and stalking is pretty high, you know. If I get in there with the peasants and that boy who always smells like cream corn tries to kiss me again, I’ll put him in a dumpster and *push it down the stairs*! And I’ll charge you extra!”

She whipped around and practically kicked open the door inside and was gone before Hannibal could admonish her. A nurse tutted fretfully as she righted the porthole handle and gave Hannibal a long suffering look.

Everyone put up with Princess because Hannibal expected them to, but he would still have to have a talk with her to remind her once again about how to act around who she referred to as “squares.”

He spent the rest of the half hour of outside recreation thinking about his exciting upcoming appointment with Cumtick, the one the disgusting man had been in such a damn hurry to get to.

The one he didn’t know about yet.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 2 Soundtrack: CocoRosie, Lemonade; when Hannibal sees Will's holy visage.

Alternate scene: When Cumtick is about to fight Will, Hannibal screams "Don't do it, Bloodbath."

I forgot to warn y'all that Hannibal is slightly more trickster god in this than he is evil. Being evil isn't as fun in a world where evil is commonplace. Don worry he still eat ppl tho.

Lmao OP cant write children

Chapter Summary

Hannibal rounds up a bunch of antivaxxers and throws them into the Potomac

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will was still chewing the last of his whatever that was on toast when he plopped down in his now familiar rubber nest in the tire fort to count out his horde of caps and traded items when a very tiny and very angry voice nearly scared him into dropping more than just mediocre loot.

"Hey! I've been watching you! You've used my tire fort at least five time for at least ten minutes each! You owe me thirty caps, you know!"

"*Oh*." Was all Will could say. He twisted his head around to try to find the source of the frankly adorable sounding outrage. A small child was hanging upside down from inside an overhanging tractor tire.

Will had jumped and that was bad enough, but now a little girl with prominent freckles and a missing tooth was trying to shake him down for simply sitting in a garbage heap. On brand.

"Oh? *OH*?! That sounds like something a spy would say! Who sent you? Who do you work for? I'll have you know my older brother is the head of security here and he'll have you thrown into the Broken Bow! Do you know what's over there?"

Her voice was almost musical, like it had half an accent, and Will found it strangely charming.

"Mirelurks?" He guessed after a moment's consideration.

"Mirelurks! They'll eat you alive, until you're dead! And then they'll use your bones to build their furniture! Nobody dreams of growing up to be a settee for crab people! So I'm going to ask you again, *weirdo*, who are you, and who do you work for?" She narrowed her eyes and twisted around so that they were face to face.

For a moment, Will was at a loss for words. He had never really interacted with children before, besides the ones they were allowed to see and talk with in the facility to gauge if any interesting results came about through different situations based on each subject's unique attributes.

Those were monitored, guided, and standardized encounters, however, and this was a real, live, possibly feral, child. He had to be wary in case this one was going to bite him. It sure looked like it wanted to.

Then abruptly, something inside him shifted. Talking to kids wasn't hard, you just had to remember what it was like to be a kid. Everything was simple. Everyone was exciting. People could actually be fun and interesting to talk to.

But most importantly, little kids wanted you to think they were cool.

He leveled a serious and steady gaze at the girl and sighed gravely.

“All right, kid. You got me. I’m a special scout agent for the Enclave, yes, *the* Enclave, and they’ve sent me here to find Rivet City’s major weakness. I’ve been using your tire fort here as a sort of base of operations.”

Will looked around quickly and lowered his voice conspiratorially.

“I could use some help you know. And the Enclave pays handsomely for good hard work. I need information.”

The little girl seemed to perk up at this, and he knew he had steered the conversation in the right direction. It was obvious she was very much having a blast and was more than willing to play along with this new game between them.

“Hey bub, you just said the right thing to the right person! I’m a veritable hub of knowledge for the workings of this place! Hell, give me enough scrap metal, I could rebuild it from memory! Design flaws and all! My dad used to assemble and repair shotguns for the Brotherhood of Steel, you know. He’s the one who fixed the choke spread problem.” She beamed ominously at him and Will tried hard not to snicker.

“Perfect. An expert. I’ll see if I can’t have HQ add on a consultation fee to your payment.”

She somehow managed to beam brighter at that.

“But like I said, what I’m looking for...are weaknesses in the ship. Anything you know about that might be fiscally sound for someone like you?”

The girl furrowed her brow and pursed her lips. After a moment she closed her eyes and nodded. Will waited quietly while the girl appeared to think rather intensely. Her eyes flew open and she looked satisfied.

“Hmmm. There are a few spots...the door on level 3 that opens to nothing, the bottomless kitchen on the west side, that one giant fucking hole in the front of the ship where the whole thing is literally *broken in half*, and the science lab has an escape hatch with a rope ladder.”

Will smirked at her and wondered if he should admonish her for cursing, but he was vaguely afraid she would bully him from now on for being lame.

“Alright, I’ll make a note in my logs,” he drawled sarcastically. Suddenly Will was very happy he had risked looking like he talked to tennis rackets for real estate advice to hide in here, because barring the considerable debt he was now apparently in, he suspected he was enjoying himself.

“More importantly, what about the human factor? Your brother...is he...smart?” Will already knew what her answer would be because he had interacted with the head of security before, and even if it had been friendly, Will had already resolved never to cross him. It was a major motivator now in his being very friendly with the man’s kid sister.

The girl seemed more at ease suddenly, thinking rather than terrorizing, and Will assumed this meant she had let down her guard for now.

She folded her arms on the inner tire rim and considered him gravely.

“Sharp as a deathclaw’s favorite pinkie toe. He knows this place almost as well as I do, and his special talent is always knowing where he needs to be and when to be there. You’ll have a hard time getting a drop on him. You won’t hurt him will you?” She suddenly looked serious and protective.

Will chuckled. “Of course not! In fact, we could use a man like him. Maybe he’ll be interested in joining!” They paused and gave each other a dark sardonic smile. They both knew that if Enclave soldiers ever came for this place in earnest, enlistment was probably the last thing they would offer.

The Enclave was one of the first major factions Will had been educated on when he had first emerged from the vault. It was a main factor in giving him hope for a continued society out here.

The technology they were rumored to use sounded like it surpassed even Vault-tech's by leaps and bounds. Will knew they could literally save the wasteland.

But any hope he felt for the saviors of apocalyptia was soon quashed when he was informed about their practices. They were hurting people. Put into the right hands, their resources had the power to do good. But they weren't giving it away. And who could stand up to their might and take it?

It was all hopeless. Everyone in the wasteland was either dying or working really hard on it. Anybody strong enough to help was harming instead. Nobody really wanted to help anybody. Not for free, anyway.

Will had realized long ago that the only thing keeping him alive at this point was waking up every day looking for something to live for. He gazed at the little girl in front of him and wondered what her life would hold. He hoped she stayed here for all of it. On this ship. Where it was safe. For now.

"What's your name?" He said softly, wary because a lot of the names out here were very similar, usually something very exotic, such as "*Go fuck yourself*," and "*Give me a good bj and I'll tell ya*." Will had stopped trying to be so polite very early on.

The girl's nostrils flared at the question and she inhaled deeply. It was clear this was her favorite part. She cleared her throat.

"My name is Princess Plasma Cannon, and it's a pleasure to meet me! I find things for a fee. I can also lose things for a fee! I don't deal in drugs, high caliber projectile weapons, and I don't do windows. Complaints may be fielded to my secretary. Prices are subject to change." She said the last bit under her breathe.

"I think I can tolerate you, so you may call me Princess, even though you're a nonbobber. That means an outsider." She added at his puzzled look.

Will nodded and smiled. He knew that normally wasteland children were not this intelligent or fierce, and he had only seen maybe seven other children on the boat during his visits.

He had never spoken with them, but he already knew they were not going to be anything like this one. He wondered what she must have gone through already. When she shifted her head, Will caught glimpses of deep scars under the collar of her sweater. Every one he saw wounded him a little.

Will felt their little shadow play was closing early due to morbidity and it may be high time to actually connect with someone out here, despite all the warnings he had been given *not to do that.*

He resigned himself and sighed.

"Thank you for the honor." He said. Princess looked suspicious of the obvious sincerity in Will's voice. He almost laughed aloud at the irony of two possibly damaged humans trying to be nice to one another with the other trying to figure out how to let them.

"Im Jack," he said simply, pointing to a little marking on his neck behind his ear. "I'm also good at finding things. Good at losing things too, but I usually do that on accident. And for free. I don't have a secretary."

Princess leaned in carefully to look at the marking. "You can borrow mine. He's really good. I haven't missed a single complaint since I've had him. Although he usually tries to give me pointers on-"

Suddenly Will jerked back, his eyes wide and full of alarm. Princess looked surprised but not insulted at the sudden withdrawal.

"You...just...don't do that. Don't get so close to people. They could grab you quicker than you think. Before you know it. They could drag you off and, and

(*eviscerate*)

hurt you. You shouldn't just-" Will huffed and stopped because the girl was suddenly looking at him like she just watched him try to put his pants on upside down and was now deeply, deeply sad about it.

"I'm fine, *kvailys*." She raised her arm to show him she was gripping a very vicious looking curved blade in her very tiny hand.

"I know what to do." A calm resolve formed on her face that Will hadn't seen on stronger men than him. "My secretary showed me."

Will's spine had almost cooled down to room temperature when they both turned to assess the rapidly approaching footsteps coming from outside the fort, and when he looked back to the seven year old girl for advice on what to do, she was gone.

"Uh...excuse me? Hello?" Someone called out hopefully. Will recognized Gary's voice easily and he poked his head out of a tire.

Gary blinked when he saw him but soldiered on admiringly.

"Oh! Yes! You! You need to hurry! The old lady you've been looking for? Wyatt just told me that Pog said that Kaiser passed her leaving over the brigde! Just now!"

He was breathless from running and his face was so bright it may have set Will's Pipboy off for radiation danger if he had kept it on him inside the city.

Taken aback, Will didn't know which of his many questions to ask first, but luckily he was relieved of this duty by Princess, who, rather angrily, stuck her head out of a neighboring tire and immediately started sputtering indignantly.

"*You*?! You're the one everyone is helping to look for the old lady?! You, a *land hoe*?! Even *I've* run intel on her! I owe *favors* because of you!" He wasn't sure why, but this seemed to completely unhinge the child. While she cursed and mumbled on about how hard she had worked for a *dirtsnacker*, Will turned back to Gary.

"You've been...trying to find her? Because I asked about her? Once?" He was trying to not be so presumptuous as to assume that someone would do something kind for him specifically, but it looked to be that way.

"*Ridiculous* use of talent" Princess's head hissed quietly beside his.

Gary suddenly looked uncomfortable.

"Well, I didn't mean to pry into your business, sir, but since you mentioned it, and well, there's not much else to do on this tub, I've been asking around, and well...I suppose some of the guys made a bit of a game of it."

Gary finished awkwardly and shrugged. Princess mumbled something vindictive about wasted time and resources.

"No, no, thank you, I just...right. How much do I owe you?" Will ducked back into the fort to hastily scrounge his things together, then lithely crawled out of the main entrance, fastening his cloak and threading his satchel over his head and crossbody in one smoothly practiced motion.

"Oh...owe? Oh, no I would never charge you!" (Princess made a disgusted noise that echoed up into the rafters) "just pay it forward, and you know, let me in on some juicy gossip sometime, ya dig?" Gary chuckled jovially but when Will glanced at Princess, the look on her face let him know she did not tolerate friendly competition on the info circuit.

"I- I'm not sure what to say, besides thank you." Will stammered as he backed away from them, itching to catch up to the old woman who had been kind to him once, solely because he had been scared and puffy-eyed.

"I'll take it!" Gary guffawed. "You should hurry, though-"

“Right! And thank you, Princess, for the free stay in your fort!” Will offered, because Princess was now back to grumbling darkly.

The girl snapped out of it immediately.

“Hey! What! You’re leaving?!” She trilled, sounding genuinely disappointing and hurting Will’s heart a little bit.

“Duty calls, I’m afraid. That woman is the most dangerous operative we have, and she’s gone rogue. The very future of the wasteland depends on me! Wish me luck, my Lady!”

Will bowed to her as Gary stood looking confused and alarmed.

Will tried to wipe the strange look on Princess’s face out of his mind as he whipped around and headed for the door. He had gotten only a few long strides when Princess called out to him.

“*Heeeey*! I forgot to tell you!” Her pretty voice compelled him to turn around for a last look. “You’re *really* hairy!”

Will didn’t know if that was an endorsement or a condemnation, but he waved at her and Gary and turned to all-out run for the door this time, just to be safe.

As he jogged along, deftly avoiding passers by and the random slag heap, he was trying very hard to ignore the nagging worry that was eating at his stomach once again.

When that weird internal shift inside him happened this time, he had rode it, the way he had planned, in case it happened again.

It came to him easily now, he guessed because he was ready this time, and the strange memories, and impressions of memories, flitted through his mind clear enough that he could almost describe them.

The feeling of being a kid again. The excitement. The naivety. The hope.

It had been a priceless tool this time, he felt he could not have interacted so seamlessly with a kid like that on his own.

It was still terrifying. The fact he had recalled being that young. That was the problem.

Because as far as Will knew, he had never actually been a little kid.

Chapter End Notes

In case you’re wondering, his King Arthur look. Very hairy.

Chapter Soundtrack: Noah’s Ark - CocoRosie

Executive Producer Dick Wolf

Chapter Summary

> Sorry I'm having to split one long chapter up into two, the flow is a little off because I keep editing paragraphs in and out lol. I promise I'm going to attempt to insert more explanations for what's going on with the Fallout side of things, but right now some stuff needs to be vague. Thanks for reading!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will was bounding up to the main stairway to the porthole when several people he was sure he had never met before stopped him to tell him they had seen the old woman.

He was thanking them all profusely and was trying not to get a little choked up as people smiled at him knowingly and waved.

He wondered belatedly if the reason Gary gave for his looking for the old woman was even half true. His chest felt very tight suddenly.

He was greeted by a gust of cold air as he passed out of the warm foyer and out onto the check-in deck that led to the bridge to leave Rivet City.

Could he have been wrong about the people out here? Could it be possible that there were kind souls, willing to help a stranger pay back a debt to someone who was kind to him?

His eyes were still adjusting to the light as he scanned the opposite shoreline for movement.

He thought back to those first cold nights of terror he spent alone and hungry, exploring the area surrounding the vault as carefully and quietly as he could, wondering if he was going to off himself that night or wait til the next one.

It was all a miserable blur now, but he was nevertheless grateful he had somehow stuck it out. If he wasn't mistaken, he had made two new friends just now, and he was about to possibly connect with another.

His stomach was full. He had a decent amount of caps on him. His clothes were warm and dry, the day was clear and he knew he was relatively safe for at least a half mile in any direction. Things were looking up.

He squinted through a cloud of dust and saw a small gray shape that slowly coalesced into...*the old woman*! She was right there, waddling steadily down the road about fifty yards past the access ramp. He wouldn't even be out of breath when he caught up to her.

He let out a bark of laughter and took a step towards the bridge.

Then he was roughly grabbed from behind by what felt like two wildly out of region gorillas.

Will bucked and struggled and wondered why the nearby gate guard was doing nothing to help him until he caught a police baton to his stomach. He choked and sputtered and went limp as the air was knocked out of him.

He looked down and saw security guard boots through his wavering vision and tried hard to comprehend it. He knew he shouldn't be resisting but his fight or flight instinct was still making him struggle a little.

"I dint...I *dident* do anythn!" Will slurred, his solar plexus still feeling like it was having the worst possible sex ever.

"If you don't stop struggling I'll do that again, but from the inside," one of the guards growled. The other guard snorted.

"Do you always have to be so crude, Jeff? I mean look at him, he's what, 17?"

Will was 30. He tried to say this but his mouth still wasn't doing the word thing.

"It works doesn't it?" Jeff drawled, unbothered. They started to drag Will back inside.

"Wait! You don't unner-*under*stand! That old woman- I have to-" Will made one last good try for the bridge and nearly had his arms dislocated for his efforts.

"Kid! Will you stop being such a little mudfucker already!"

Will had been called so many derogatory land based insults today he was beginning to take it personally.

"I don't care if your late for tea, or for a quilting circle, or even for a fucking date, *she's going to have to hit you up for a raincheck*!"

Will saw the futility in resisting but was still indignant at the harshness of his treatment.

"Why the hell are you doing this? What did I do? All I did here was eat and-"

Will's heart dropped. He had been seen talking to Princess. He was suddenly sure that was it. Or had she said something to her older brother? No, Will didn't think she was the type. He was almost always right about these things.

He was still terrified things had been taken the wrong way and was trying very hard to reassure himself this could all be straightened out, both Princess and Gary could vouch for him, as well as anyone who had passed by the area.

His mind raced as he was frog marched down a hall and up a flight of stairs to an office room that now held only a table, two chairs and a man. Everything except the area directly

under a dim hanging lamp over the table was bathed in darkness. Will swallowed audibly.

The head of security, a no-nonsense man named Harkness, was already sitting on one side of the table, poring over notes in a file and scowling, and looked up only after Will was roughly dropped into the seat opposite him.

He took in Will's disheveled and winded visage and gave his two colleagues a stern look.

"Ah. Please forgive the rough introduction, Mr....uhm?" Harkness offered strategically.

Will forced his voice as flat as it would go.

"Just Jack, actually."

Will didn't have a last name. And even if he did, he wouldn't have given it to anyone.

"Sure. Jack." Harkness steepled his strangely elegant fingers in front of him and smiled. "Do you know why you're here?"

Will tried hard not to raise his voice.

"Listen, I didn't even know she was going to be in there, ok? I just wanted some privacy. You can ask her! We-" Will paused again and remembered the game they played. Was this about the Enclave agent thing?

If the puzzled look on Harkness's face was any indication, he was just as confused as Will about what was going on.

"Who are you talking about? Who's is this '*she*?'" Harkness murmured.

"This isn't about your little sister?" Will pleaded.

"I don't have a little sister." He said darkly.

Will stared at him.

"But Princess, she said-"

Harkness glanced at the other two guards flanking Will on either side.

"*Princess*." They all said in unison. Will's eye started twitching.

"Man, I can either take care of the whole ship or I can deal with whatever one thing Princess is doing at the moment. I can't do both. No. This isn't about her, *thank god*."

He gathered the papers he had been scanning and set them aside.

"This morning, there was a little incident on the bridge. Care to tell us about that?"

Sudden relief flooded Will and he nearly burst into tears and laughter at the same time. This was manageable, unless that guy had friends in high places, which Will would have bet one

million u.s. beard hairs he didn't.

"Hey, woah, that guy shoved me first, there are witnesses. If a guard hadn't stopped him, he was going to throw me off the bridge!" Will tried not to sound too petulant as he pleaded his case.

Harkness stared at Will in hard silence for a few moments before continuing.

"Funny you should mention being thrown off something high." The man began slowly as he exchanged glances with his colleagues once again before returning his gaze back to Will.

"Because that man was found at the bottom of a conveyor shaft on the west side of the ship an hour ago, impaled on rebar and not doing a very good job of keeping his insides to himself. Jim still hasn't found all of them" The security head finished with a shudder.

Will gaped at him. The panic machine inside him came thrumming back into roiling life.

"Woah-hey-no, no, I would never....*kill* a man for, for, *shoving* me!" Will stammered desperately. "I didn't know him! Why would I..I didn't have any real...*qualms* with him!"

Harkness blinked at the word.

"Hm. Well, Jack, it seems *qualms* are all he had with you. Do you realize you're wearing the cloak belonging to that man, ah...Cumtick's most longest and closest friend? He's dead, too, isn't he, Jack?"

Will glanced down at his dark shawl and remembered the mangled corpse he had pulled it off of.

Lady Luck must think she's some kind of funny asshole, thought Will bleakly.

"That...was an accident." He almost whispered, barely audible over the random noises constantly coming from every direction on the ship.

One of the guards behind him laughed skeptically and Harkness hushed him with a look.

"You...*accidentally*...killed Fuckface Catron. Possibly the most dangerous and cold blooded raider boss in this region."

Will swallowed but remained silent.

"Let me guess, he tripped over a banana peel you left laying out," Harkness offered.

"Hey, maybe they were putting up decorations and he wasn't a good ladder spotter." One guard offered to the other beside him, causing Harkness to smile cruelly at Will expectantly.

"That's not exactly what happened, no." Will admitted irritably. This was ridiculous. How far had the old lady gotten by now? Will decided to be assertive for once and pushed forward to end this quickly.

“You said he was found an hour ago, right? Just go down to the marketplace, ask any of the vendors! I went there first thing and stayed there all morning! Ask Gary! Ask *Princess* if you have to!” Will finished, suddenly exhausted.

Harkness’s stern face didn’t change but Will knew he was right. He refused to look away.

“You’re correct. Easily done.” Harkness agreed abruptly, surprising Will. He nodded to the guard closest to the door.

If it was so easy, why didn’t you do that in the first place, Will thought angrily as the guard exited the room and closed the door. He was dreading the awkward wait while the other guard asked around the marketplace, but his worry wasn’t necessary.

From outside, shrill enough to make them all jump, came a familiar but garbled shout. Will turned to look at the door in sudden concern and sympathy.

After a moment of muffled talking from the guard, there came a tirade that sounded like it was coming from a bodybuilding pixie.

The three men listened uncomfortably as a little girl tore down a tall man in riot gear outside the rusty thick wall. Will wanted to laugh. Maybe this ship was a castle after all.

The chiding finally stopped and stomping was heard. A moment later the guard came back in but didn’t look at anyone at first as he resumed his station behind Will.

“He’s clear,” the guard confirmed unnecessarily.

Harkness let out a sighing groan that luckily drowned out Will’s similar one for the most part.

“Right. Apologies accepted, I really must be going now.” Will stood up and moved to leave but the two guards roughly shoved him back down into the warped metal chair with a rattle.

“We’re not done with you, yet, Jack,” Harkness said urgently. “There’s someone else here that would like a word with you, if you don’t mind.” The look Harkness gave him let him know Will didn’t mind at all. That being said, he could sense tension in the room suddenly.

“He’s a very generous and...*wise* man. Please be as polite as possible and listen carefully to what he says. It will only benefit you to be agreeable. And it will do the opposite if you’re not.” It was clear Harkness was choosing his words carefully now, and that he was scared. For some reason Will thought of the man in the red suit.

His heart started pounding thickly and it nearly exploded when the head of security stood up and moved towards the door with his two colleagues, making it clear he was really going to have to face this alone.

Harkness put a heavy hand on Will’s shoulder. Will glanced down at it, then up at the man who now looked more friendly since turning off *Interrogation Mode*.

“I really am sorry for the misunderstanding. Good luck.” He said in a low voice.

His sincerity caught Will off guard and before he could think to say anything, he was alone.

Chapter End Notes

Guess what Fallout 3 character I was pissed you couldn’t get as a companion.

Chapter Soundtrack: Gangsta's Paradise - Coolio, L.V.

Even he understands fair wage

Chapter Summary

Here comes the ✨boooooy✨

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will sat in the non-quiet of the room and said a silent *see you around* to the old woman as he closed his eyes and sighed. He tried to worry about who wanted to talk to him and why, but he found his emotional energy reserves were in the red.

The worse they could do was tell him he could never come back to the city, but there were ways around that.

Gary would tell anyone who listened that half the people on this ship were “life-long ban survivors.”

Will heard the door open and turned to behold the only other suit he had ever seen on a real person.

It wasn’t the man from the clinic, however.

This man had a stout build and a stylish beard and dark hair. His suit was also in better condition, as if it had been made very recently.

A cloud of sweet smelling smoke trailed after him through the door and now spread throughout the room like a loyal guard dog, searching out enemies to take down. Or prey.

Will took one look at the man and figured he was just around two miles down in deep shit right now and tried to take Harkness’s advice to heart, waiting to be spoken to because that was the way he had always been instructed to be “polite.”

The smiling man made a lethargic circle around Will like a primordial shark and sat opposite him, a lit cigar glowing dimly in his right hand.

He still said nothing as he unbuttoned his jacket and situated himself luxuriously on the crappy metal folding chair, all the while smiling at Will like he had personally fixed the whole air conditioning situation going on outside.

“*Well*,” the man drawled slow and thick as syrup, “I *suppose* since my plan to blackmail you has somehow fallen through, we’ll have to do this the old fashioned way.”

His smile grew. Will's leg bones were itching. There was something very wrong here.

"I have a job for you. My name is Abel Allistair Forthright Grant Gideon Tenpenny, and I own Tenpenny tower."

Will had heard the place mentioned in passing, but he genuinely didn't know if he was supposed to be impressed or not, so he pretended he was and shoved down the urge to ask if he could borrow some names sometime, seeing as he only had the one.

"My name's Jack. It's an honor to meet you." He tried not to make it sound like the question it was and somehow managed awe. Perfect.

"Ah, polite *and* resourceful! I love a man who really understands the way things are in the world, *know what I mean*? Most wastelands would take this opportunity to try to kill me, you know, and here you are being so very...*compliant*. Admirable." Tenpenny's voice was charismatic to the point of being hypnotic. But Will knew what he was really doing was letting him in on how he expected him to act.

He knew he was going to need help. He tried to remember the feeling of the shift, tried to rummage around for it in the dark of his highly stressed mind. Nothing.

"With all due respect," Will began carefully, "when you said you were going to blackmail me..."

Tenpenny flapped his hands at Will dismissively to signify he wasn't angry with him for thwarting it.

"Oh, it was no *big thing*, never hurts to try, but the man you killed, Cumtick, he was a bit of a thorn in the side of many of my acquaintances, and if you had a true businessman's heart, you'd be charging *me*, instead." He finished coyly.

"I didn't kill him." Will said firmly in a tone he hoped wasn't too insolent.

"Yes, we've established that haven't we? Little Princess, the girl who may or may not lie for money. *Saved by the belle* as it were, I'm impressed you could afford her alibi rate."

"I'm broke." Will admitted.

"With a fib *that* big, I'm not surprised," chuckled Tenpenny.

Then something shifted in Will. At first he thought it was his patience finally snapping, but no. This seemed like the other direction.

Where the hell have you been, Will screamed internally.

He felt a slow smile creep across his face as he let his body relax and lean forward. What was happening.

He felt his mouth say in a tone he didn't quite recognize:

“Alright. Maybe it *did* put me in the red a little. And now I’m in debt. Your old-fashioned way of doing things. It wouldn’t happen to involve *money*, now would it? We’re both busy men. I myself had to cancel a very important meeting to fit you into my schedule. I would never *dream* to presume to charge you for any accrued loss I might have suffered for that, but I would respectfully ask that you keep it in consideration as you lay out whatever you’re asking of me and what I’m being paid for in the long run. Gotta make a living.”

Will tried to give a genuine smile to sell whatever was happening but he was afraid it might be coming off as slightly maniacal.

Either way, it worked. Tenpenny’s mouth jerked up in a sardonic half-grin and he leaned back to regard him fully.

“My boy, with every word you say, my *fondness* for your particular *style* is growing. Know your worth!” He dashed his finger on the table to accentuate his point. “There’s a difference between confidence and hubris. People seem to think it’s more admirable to be the former rather than the latter. But the real trick is to find the *sweet* spot, usually right around the middle ground. That’s where you need to be to get what you want out of life.”

“Can’t make a million being modest.” Will intoned sleazily in a calculated attempt to ape Tenpenny’s.

He felt something slide into place as he watched the other man laugh and slap the table in appreciation.

He didn’t know if he was okay with this. On one hand, whatever this was seemed to be working. On the other, he felt like this was cheating, somehow.

“I *love* it! My boy, I must admit I had my doubts when I first saw you, but the reputation that preceded you has proven correct enough for me. You have the job!” Tenpenny announced magnanimously.

Will managed to sound natural as he laughed.

“Great! And here I was worried about references. Now what the hell is it that I’m doing?”

Tenpenny took a moment to relight his cigar and pulled on it greedily. He cleared his throat and jabbed the cigar in Will’s direction before beginning in a professional tone:

“It’s *simple* really, essentially a retrieval mission. To the west of here, there used to be a *beautiful* city, called Fairfax. Nowadays, it’s mostly just referred to as Fairfax Ruins.”

Will knew where that was, but he had scouted it out and deemed it too dangerous to get too close to.

He nodded to signal he was familiar with the area. Tenpenny continued.

“I’ve sent *seven* people into those ruins to retrieve something I’ve been looking for for quite some time and every single one has ended up as *party decorations* for the residents.”

The residents being an infestation of raiders.

“Ain’t that the proverbial bitch,” Will sighed sympathetically.

“You can imagine,” Tenpenny sneered.

Will was confused. He thought for a moment.

“With all due respect, I think you might have the wrong guy. That kind of high risk job- Have you considered maybe Talon Company...?”

Talon company, a ruthless mercenary group, was another quick lesson for Will. Nobody had to tell him about them. He had found out on his own. The thought still stung him deeply.

Tenpenny shook his head mournfully.

“Three of those seven people were high ranking soldiers with Talon. I received reports that the raiders used pieces of their body in *particular* to finish off a welcome sign on one side of the city. Oh, well. Can’t fault them for wanting to express themselves through art. *Language of the masses* and all that.”

Will was trying to think of the most polite way to call this man a lunatic. In the end his curiosity got the better of him.

“Mr. Tenpenny, I’m not sure I understand fully why you’re asking me to do this. I’m a scavver. I find, and sell, useful looking trash. I’m not some merc in disguise and I don’t know if that’s what you’ve heard-“

“What I heard, *Jack*, was that about three weeks ago, a stranger showed up in Rivet City wearing Fuckface Catron’s prized cloak, wrapped up all *nice* and cozy, like an irradiated burrito. He had a gash across his cheek and a black eye, but he was no more the worse for wear.”

Will remained silent and kept his face neutral. An image seeped into his head. The silhouette of a gargantuan man framed in a dark doorway. He was standing deathly still and silent, staring into the even darker room Will was hiding in as the gun in his huge hand existed loudly enough for both of them.

Tenpenny leaned in to regard Will closely.

“You took out the boogeyman. And you’re *not even limping*.”

“Why is everyone so convinced I killed him?”

Another image, of the man in the doorway making the decision to step into the room and raise his gun to point at the figure in the corner opposite and pull the trigger two times, one in each leg.

“Because Fuckface wasn’t likely to give that cloak away to a cold, *lonely* traveler down on his luck. Are you aware his own sweet beloved *mother* made it for him? Out of the very

blanket his father was murdered in," Tenpenny finished matter-of-factly.

Will grabbed that last bit out of the air before it settled in his brain and stuffed it way, way down in his '*to be deleted*' folder.

"I could have just...found it." Will theorized.

Tenpenny laughed robustly at that, his attractive face crinkling into something almost friendly.

"My *dear* boy, nobody would be stupid enough to kill a trophy buck and leave the *horns* to rot. Anybody and everybody knows what that cloak means. They've literally written *songs* about it," he finished happily.

Will knew he couldn't profess total ignorance to that because it would raise some very uncomfortable questions.

"How *did* you do it, by the way?" Tenpenny growled as he drew another lungful of smoke and pushed it out into tendrils around them.

It was giving Will a headache.

He tried to keep the images out of his head this time, but that only seemed to make it worse.

The back of the man's head as he investigated the humanoid figure hanging in the corner of the room, realizing too late that this man was dead, had been for a while, and the rustling he had heard coming from this room couldn't have been him.

"I tricked him. I used a decoy to lure him in," Will said slowly, wondering if this was going to help or hinder him.

"*Clever*," was all Tenpenny offered, so Will continued.

"I hit him on the side of the head with a tire iron. After that, it was all a blur," Will finished dreamily.

It was not all a blur. *Not at all*.

It was enough for Tenpenny.

"*Ah*, you see, won, *fair* and *square*. If you can handle Fuckface, you can handle a few *syphilis* drenched sewer junkies. And here I thought we shared an *understanding* about *modesty*," Tenpenny chided sweetly.

Will still wasn't fully convinced that was the whole story. He shook his head.

"There's something else, isn't there? Killing a raider who managed to keep his shit together just a little better than the rest isn't that impressive in the scheme of things. And you're really taking my word for a lot of-"

“Do you know what a 213CR Trinity-Hewitt processor is?” Tenpenny asked slyly.

Will managed not to twitch at that. He did know what a 213CR Trinity-Hewitt processor was. He had sold three in the marketplace for a very good price by his standards, which admittedly wasn’t much. Still, nobody but him seemed to realize their full potential.

“This is *just* like that, but with a few more bells and whistles. It’s such a *little* thing, as you already know, won’t weigh you down *any* and might even settle your tab with little Princess in the end.” Tenpenny arched his eyebrows and waited for Will to ask the question that would finally settle this.

Will hesitated. He knew that if he asked the question and Tenpenny gave him a high enough number, there was no turning back.

Will wasn’t greedy. All he wanted was to be left to his scavving and to be able to eat. At the moment, a place of residence was a pipe dream he was comforting himself with at night as a vague goal in the long run.

But if he could earn enough to rent out a small closet room on the ship for even just a few months...

Will stared into the other man’s squinted eyes and sighed.

“Alright, how much is this chip worth to you?” Will asked. He knew better than to ask how much the chip was worth by itself. There was a difference. And it mattered right now.

The resulting indulgent smile was so wide, it seemed to cut Tenpenny’s head in two.

“Four hundred caps,” Tenpenny oozed.

Will snorted.

“A good *start*, but considering the trek I’d have to make-“

“Alright, five hundred.”

“And once I get there, who know what *diseases* I could get, just by simply touching-“

“Your twisting my arm, here, but six hundred caps.”

“*Supplies* to consider-“

“Seven hundred caps, and I’ll go no higher,” Tenpenny finished loftily as he held up his hands in defeat.

Will’s bitter smile mirrored Tenpenny’s pleased one across the table.

We’ll see about that, came a voice inside him he definitely didn’t recognize. He raised his eyebrows.

“Alright. Agreeable. I need as many details as possible. Lay it all out for me, *boss*.”

Tenpenny grinned like a cat from a drug trip and proceeded to lay it all out for him.

****

Fifteen minutes later, Tenpenny and Will stood and shook hands and Tenpenny moved towards the door.

“I’ll leave word that anything you need for your journey will be provided via *credit* on my account in the marketplace. It *truly* is a pleasure to be working with you, *Mr*....?” Tenpenny purred as he brushed any residual poverty dust off the sleeves of his suit.

Will knew this moment was coming and he had been thinking about it for a while. He had put off choosing a surname for as long as possible, but he didn’t feel safe telling this man in particular that he had never been given a last name.

He thought back wistfully to the only person inside the vault with any authority that had been truly kind to him. He figured that was close enough to a parent to count.

“Graham,” decided Will. He thought he liked the sound of it.

“Mr. *Graham*! Good *solid* name. If this goes well, I could find some more...*permanent* use for you, possibly back *home*.”

Tenpenny smiled like this was the most magnanimous allowance he could bestow, and Will had a feeling it might just be.

“I wish you all the luck in the world, *Mr. Graham*. I do hope to see you *soon*,” he sneered as he stepped close to the door. He rapped his knuckle twice against the porthole door and it swung open immediately.

“*Toodaloo*,” was all he said, and without waiting for a reply, he was gone.

Will stood staring at the newly vacant spot for a few moments. Then, when he was sure the receding footsteps were sufficiently out of hearing range, he promptly threw himself at the trash can in the corner and puked as quietly as possible. He did very well, he thought, thanks mostly to his previous stealth vomit practice sessions in the wasteland.

Harkness appeared at the door and looked sympathetically down at Will.

Will indicated the trash can.

“Sorry- I kinda-“ was all he could manage.

Harkness nodded and came over to help him up.

“He tends to have that effect on people. There’s just something off about him, like looking down some twisty nightmare hallway,” the tall man said simply.

“He laces his cigars with something,” Will grumbled.

Harkness narrowed his eyes. Will expected him to mock the idea, but he didn’t.

“Is that so? That’s...*interesting*. I had my suspicions, but-“ Harkness trailed off darkly. “Any idea what?”

Will didn’t know and said as much. Just that he knew those weren’t your average *Cubans*.

Harkness seemed to be distracted as he stepped aside and motioned Will towards the exit to the hallway.

“I wanted to thank you, by the way. You avenged a lot of wrongs and saved countless lives, doing what you did. *Killing Fuckface*, I mean.”

Will was too tired to argue. People were going to believe what they wanted to believe, even though it made it sound as if Will had sought out Fuckface with the sole purpose of slaughtering him like a dog in the streets.

Harkness’s voice was gentle when he wasn’t accusing you of murder, and he seemed like a rational person.

Will had realized early on that the earnest man had never wanted him involved in all this mess in the first place, and had been happy for the chance to prove his innocence in the murder of Cumtick.

Will also realized that Harkness’s moral compass and sense of duty were key factors in keeping this place as civilized as it was. The rest of the wasteland didn’t care if some louse-hotel screamed in terror all the way to the bottom of a dark hole in a blood-smelling boat city. Will respected that.

Nevertheless, he was *Authority*. *Authority* could act nice one second and go for your neck the next.

At the end of the hall to the stairs, the two guards from before were waiting and looking frazzled. Will guessed they had been the ones to accommodate Tenpenny to wherever he needed to go. They all nodded humbly to each other.

“I’ll leave you with Jeff and Roman. It looks like you’ve all trauma bonded so I won’t have to worry about them being too rough with you *this* time,” Harkness said with a meaningful look to the other two men.

“Is there anything else we could possibly assist with?” He continued.

Will sensed a kernel of sincerity in the offer but he was also aware that Harkness had a vested interest in whatever Tenpenny had asked Will to do, in the event it might cause some very deadly conflict of interest between the two of them.

“Thank you, but no. I’ll just be grabbing what little I need from the marketplace and I’ll be on my way.” He tried to offer a genuine smile and was rewarded with Harkness visibly

relaxing and returning the smile.

They parted with a final awkward nod and started down the long hallway that would eventually lead to a back door in the marketplace on the south end. Will was still so riled up he didn't question how he knew this.

"Listen, *champ*," started Jeff as they trudged along in the semidarkness. Will rolled his eyes. "I have a little advice for you for when your dealing with Princess. She looks like a little kid. But that's not what she is. *That's not what she is*." Will thought the man was having a fit or something and looked to Roman for guidance. Roman merely stared straight forward and wore the face of the tired mom friend.

They stopped at the end of the hall and Jeff startled Will badly by roughly clapping his shoulders in his hands and turning him to face him head on.

"Just remember this, bud. Watch what you say around Princess. *And watch what Princess says around you*," he finished ominously.

They all stood in silence for a moment.

"What the hell does that even *mean*?" Roman pleaded beside them.

Will quickly pushed through yet another god damn porthole door out into the marketplace, and set about gathering all the things he needed. He tried to stick to vendors who he knew lacked the requisite fuck it took to ask about the old woman.

He had a long trip ahead of him.

Chapter End Notes

Writing for Abel is straight up writer-on-italics-button violence. I'm not sure it can handle Mason.

Also Jeff is 100% Charlie Day. I wanted those two to be more like the Andys from Hot Fuzz but this is too funny.

Chapter Soundtrack: idk probably something by The Mars Volta lol

It’s 💖💖💖JIMMMMYYYY!!!💖💖💖 and brian

Chapter Summary

A longer chapter this time!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was late afternoon and Hannibal had been behaving himself and was innocently finishing off paperwork in his office when something very loud happened.

The loud thing that happened was Princess coming home.

Hannibal wasn’t sure how someone could cuss a door open, but somehow she must have managed it. He was very proud of her, to be honest.

Her arms overflowing with random trinkets and items she had collected throughout the day, Princess carefully stepped through the oval door into the former quiet of what she referred to as “her office.”

Hannibal had chosen this particular series of rooms for his practice and home because of the layout. It was maybe the only residence on the ship with a foyer leading into his study that also served as the only mental health clinic in the wasteland.

He had spent an entire week on land trying to find the right kind of sliding door to install to render the foyer into a waiting room and Princess had shot a hole in it her second week there.

Seeing as how she had technically done it to save his life, however, Hannibal merely thanked her for the new peephole and had it framed.

Presently, Princess dumped her no doubt legitimately acquired haul on the sofa beside the door and immediately started sorting it as she greeted Hannibal.

“Well, if you want to know what I think, he’s not really worth your interest,” she warned irritably as she dragged a waste basket closer for rejected items.

“You pass that same judgment for everyone. Every time,” Hannibal sighed as he sat the paperwork aside resignedly.

Princess shrugged as she casually broke a flimsy switchblade knife in two and tossed it.

“Stop asking me, then,” she chirped as Hannibal got up to come over and help her sort. Unsurprisingly, he found it was mostly knives, comic books and junk food.

Hannibal allowed the junk food because he knew she used it for bartering, mostly.

He took much pride in the fact that Princess was possibly the healthiest and most well-fed juvenile alive in the wasteland, and that included the children living in that positively phallic stack of milk crates called Tenpenny Tower.

"What is his name?" Hannibal asked as he tossed a rusty push dagger in the bin.

"He *said* it was Jack," Princess said with an eye roll.

"But you don't think that's true."

"No. There wasn't a Jack in the visitor's log, either."

The visitor's log was a very well guarded notebook in the security clearance area.

Hannibal smiled. He anticipated more formal complaints later.

Princess paused as she ripped out a few pages of a comic book for her wallpaper and grimaced.

"I think he said that because of his tattoo," she mumbled distractedly.

Hannibal couldn't help but glance at her sharply. A vault dweller with a tattoo? His mind exploded with possible scenarios and reasons for this. Was it for tracking? How many people had to be in a vault for that drastic of a measure to be taken? Or was it branding for segregation purposes?

"A tattoo? Are you sure? It was not a bar code, or something similar?"

Princess frowned in concentration and shook her head. "It was a card, a playing card. A Jack."

Hannibal mused at this. He certainly hadn't expected that. Was it possible he had gotten the tattoo after he had left the vault? Perhaps it was simply something he had gotten from another dweller on a whim?

Princess seemed to read his mind from his almost visible disappointment. She pressed on quickly.

"It was really well done, though. Not some poke job or even with a crappy old tattoo needle thingy like Tappy has. It looked almost printed on."

She was rewarded with Hannibal straightening back up slightly.

"I wonder if you could possibly remember what suit the Jack was specifically?" Hannibal asked distantly. Princess was aware she was losing him fast and tried to refocus him.

"I can't remember what the fucking name is, Hannibal, I'm not an encyclopedia" she said testily. The curse word seemed to bring him back well enough to illicit his infamous lip

purse. “Sorry,” she said quickly but meant the opposite. “It’s the one that looks like a clover.”

Hannibal stood up quickly and made his way to one of his many bookshelves lining the wall. Princess sighed with relief and fished out several things Hannibal had tossed in the trash as soon as his back was turned.

“That will be the Jack of Clubs! The card of the merchant, if I’m not mistaken. Ah. Here.”

He quickly leafed through the small book on cartomancy he had retrieved and found what he had been looking for. Satisfied that he was correct, he nevertheless sat down at his desk to explore his correctness more and read on.

Princess wasn’t done, however. She could feel dread forming in her stomach and she wasn’t about to let what she feared was about to happen, happen. Not if she could help it.

“Listen, Hannibal, this guy...he’s bad news. He lied to a little girl. I know he came from a vault and everything-“

“*Do* you know that?” Hannibal asked quietly as he narrowed his eyes at the ridiculous paragraph he had just read.

Princess sighed. “Well, I did feed him a lot of bullshit a normal wastie scavver would have called me out on. For instance, he didn’t know the Brotherhood of Steel don’t use shotguns. And he didn’t even blink when I mentioned they sometimes have “*choke spread problems*,” she finished in a mocking tone.

“That was very clever of you, Abigail,” Hannibal said dreamily. He wasn’t listening and Princess knew it was time to pull out the big guns.

“I *know* it was! That’s what’s so *frustrating*! I’m *wasted* here, Hannibal! Please, just take me out on one adventure! I won’t get in the way and I know how to take care of myself!”

This argument had been rehashed so many times, Hannibal was bored with it. Princess hated Hannibal’s going out periodically, even though it gave her more time for her terrorism hobbies. Her separation anxiety *was* improving steadily, but he would still sometimes have to spend hours trying to coax Princess back out of the vents on his return. He suspected she did this out of spite, because it meant he had to stay dirty that much longer.

“Abigail, we’ve been through this. There are things cleverness and subterfuge simply can’t win against. Brute strength is an ugly thing, but necessary.”

“Are you saying that because I’m a little girl?!”

“Yes.”

“That’s *sexist*!”

“You are seven.”

“*Approximately*!”

Hannibal was now so far gone at this point that he wasn't even engaging in his usual quality argument time with her and Princess felt all his attention draining into a fixed point like a sieve. It was time to end this.

"*He's working for Tenpenny, you know*!" Princess blurted out, unable to contain her jealousy a second longer.

That did it. Hannibal snapped his attention to Princess so suddenly and intensely it startled her slightly.

"In what regard?" Hannibal asked sharply.

Princess shifted uncomfortably.

"Well, I heard it kind of secondhand..." she mumbled, both of them knowing she had been eavesdropping through one of her many hiding spots in the ductwork. She wouldn't have heard the actual conversation itself, of course, because Harkness had made triple-sure there were no accessible vents above the security offices. She pressed on, desperate to put the inevitable out of his mind.

"What happened was, right as he was about to leave, some of Harkness's goons grabbed him and they...well, I heard they were going to try to pin him for *Cumtick*..." she hesitated awkwardly and didn't look at Hannibal for a few seconds.

Hannibal cocked his head slightly.

"I'm assuming they were unsuccessful," he inquired sternly.

"Well, yeah. Thanks to *yours, truly*. But I think Tenpenny wanted to use that to his advantage. Blackmail or something. Kind of flimsy, if you ask me."

Hannibal smiled cruelly at that and Princess soldiered on, happy that she had brought him joy at Tenpenny's failure.

"But he didn't even need to, in the end, did he, because this guy agreed almost immediately to whatever he asked him to do from what I hear, no hesitation whatsoever, up and out the door, on his way to do something slimy, kind of gives you an idea of what kind of person he is, huh?" Princess sneered triumphantly and crossed her arms, because Hannibal was now using one middle finger to softly fidget with the pen he had on his desk that he often abused when he was unsure about something.

"Do you think he's a bad person?" He asked unexpectedly. Princess jumped slightly.

It was true Princess had a great capacity for empathy, it was one of the traits Hannibal had tried to foster in her to ensure her survival.

She couldn't deny that the strange man seemed kind and was for the most part, harmless. She also couldn't deny that she didn't hate him as much as everyone else. She knew in her heart he could be good, if the wasteland didn't get to him, first. She knew it could happen. She gazed miserably at Hannibal. He smiled back benignly.

He had gotten what he needed from her silence, and tears were now welling in her eyes. His smile faded and he moved to get up to comfort her but her pride wouldn't have that.

"*Fine*! *Leave*! Run after another stupid tunnel rat and come back all *dirty* and *depressed* and *mope* in your *salon* for a week! I won't be here to see it! I can't take this anymore! I'm *leaving*, I'm *gone*, I'm going to go live in the sewers! Thanks for the *temporary employment*!" And with that, she grabbed her small *Badgerman* backpack and stomped out the door, slamming it hard enough that it stayed shut.

Hannibal wasn't too worried, however. He knew what she was really going to do was go down and put bad food on his tab at Gary's and eat it in the ductwork like a ceiling goblin.

Her jab about the salon was completely unnecessary, however. It was basically just a rather resplendent bathroom, really. And his record player was in there.

What he *was* bothered by was the fact that Abigail had known about Cumtick. She knew what Hannibal was, for the most part. She had witnessed it from the very beginning, and Hannibal had never attempted to hide it from her. But he knew it made her deeply sad, so he had tried to avoid doing it around her if he could help it.

Of course he should have known that Abigail, who was fiercely protective of him, would have followed along behind him as he deviated from his usual path, curious about the new routine. To his own credit, however, there was no way to know in which area of the ship Abigail would be at any given time. Still, how much had she witnessed?

He had been following Cumtick as he made his way up several stairways and corridors on the south side to a known hangout for jet users. He had been there several times, of course, both on physical and mental health emergencies alike, and had incidentally treated Cumtick here at least two times for overdosing.

As he followed along, not making any real attempt to hide his presence, as doctors frequented this part of the ship often, he jauntily hummed Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, smiling softly.

Hannibal knew the ship almost half as well as Abigail, which was more than enough, and he didn't have to try very hard to find a way to make sure Cumtick never got the satisfaction of a last fix.

When Cumtick rounded the corner on the third floor corridor that led to the jet den, Hannibal was standing right there in the middle of the dark hall, his hands behind his back and a pleasant smile on his face.

Cumtick had managed not to scream, but he had still made a rather embarrassing noise that sounded a bit like a donkey that had a car land on it suddenly.

"Good afternoon," Hannibal trilled cheerfully. Cumtick stared at the man as a dim light overhead blinked ominously.

Hannibal waited patiently for him to process this. Finally, he seemed to reboot.

"Doc...I-...well...Fancy meetin' you here!" Cumtick gasped nervously.

"Yes. Fancy that," Hannibal purred, advancing slowly and causing the other man to back up frantically around the corner to the previous wing.

"Ah, what's happened? Why're you here? Somebody got sick?" Cumtick was sweating now and it was obvious he was desperate to get to his dealer.

"Someone's dying, unfortunately."

"*Dying*! Ah, that's a real shame, ain't it? Is it Ramrod this time? I told him, you can't just be mixing that sugar dip shit in with the jet, it just doesn't work that way," he finished with a shaky chuckle, still backing up before Hannibal's lazy stride.

Hannibal continued smiling faintly but offered no confirmation. After a moment of frigid silence he tilted his head up slightly.

"I was very sorry to hear about Fuckface. He was a friend of yours, was he not?"

Cumtick's face fell. Hannibal had long known what the two of them had been was something more along the lines of "*more than just friends*."

"Ah. Yeah. *Yeah*. Some little hairy ass plug took him out. We don't know how. We just know he did." Cumtick had now started to tear up, much to Hannibal's disgust. His withdrawal symptoms were causing his emotional state to haywire a bit. Perfect. "He...he was just minding his own business, ya know, he was drunk, he was probably just looking for a place to shit," he continued on, sniffling repulsively.

"That must have hurt you terribly, to lose him so suddenly," Hannibal offered gently, laughing internally as Cumtick stubbornly kept up his backward march away from him, refusing to turn his back on the suddenly foreboding doctor.

"He didn't...he didn't have to do that to his *face*!" Cumtick spat wildly.

Something in Hannibal flared; he wanted to know more but there was a chance he could find out later, with more detail, and possibly from a better angle. At the moment, he had places he was supposed to be. He let it go.

"It just so happens I'm currently headed to a private meeting with that very same young man. I believe he has something he wants to give me that had once belonged to Fuckface. I wonder if maybe you wouldn't mind accompanying me? I believe you two have unfinished business?" Hannibal finished the ploy with a cajoling smile and a playful slight turn of his head.

Cumtick gaped at him for a moment, processing fully what was being offered. Then his face broke out into a stupid, gummy smile.

This was going to be so easy it was slightly disappointing, Hannibal suddenly realized.

“Doc...you-you really mean it? Christ, man that’s really solid of ya. I had no idea- you knew Fuckface, then? He was a really great guy, not many people saw that,” the man said as he visibly let down his guard.

“Yes. I knew Fuckface. A virtual paragon of humanity,” Hannibal said, and meant it. It wasn’t necessarily a compliment, but Cumtick didn’t notice this, of course.

Hannibal stepped past Cumtick and led the way down a separate corridor. “I’m afraid you’ll have to attend to this matter before your current concerns, as this gentleman won’t be kept waiting, if I understood correctly,” Hannibal rolled off quickly.

“Arrogant little spunk stain,” grumbled a man nicknamed after something much worse.

All Hannibal returned was a polite hum. He wanted to remain quiet to fully allow Cumtick to assess the situation further. Why of all places, had he ran into a head doctor on the third floor, and if he was there aiding someone dying from an overdose, why had he left them to fend for themselves? What were the odds Hannibal was, at this very moment, on his way to meet with the only person Cumtick wanted to see more than his drug dealer? Why was this hallway getting darker and more abandoned? The further they walked, the more Hannibal began to lose hope. He wanted Cumtick to get worried. He wanted him to be scared.

They had reached the end of the hallway and Cumtick looked around expectantly.

Hannibal frowned at him and wondered if this situation was even salvageable.

“Are you truly being sincere in your ignorance at this given moment?” Hannibal asked, the bewilderment and disappointment obvious in his voice.

“*Wuh*?” Was all Cumtick managed to slur out and Hannibal decided that would be sufficient.

The doctor stared at him flatly for a moment before lashing his hand out at lighting speed and force and catching Cumtick in the throat, knocking him back and causing him to choke and gag out something that may have been a scream if his trachea hadn’t just been one-shot tenderized.

Fortunately for the both of them, while Cumtick lacked the proper thinking equipment, his survival instinct was still very much in functioning order. Hannibal anticipated this and caught the almost clumsy right hook Cumtick threw out in a blind panic with an arm block. Cumtick attempted to back away but Hannibal moved in closer and landed another fist into his rib cage, feeling at least two bones snap and reveling in the gurgling sound the other man was now suddenly making.

Cumtick was quick to recover, however, pleasantly surprising Hannibal with an arm lock around the limb that had just effortlessly broken his ribs and the doctor only just managed to avoid a nasty break himself by twisting like a cat and using his momentum to sling the other man into the wall opposite. Cumtick bounced back almost immediately, his adrenaline no doubt going full force in this moment, and Hannibal was smiling as a knife materialized in his opponent’s hand, swinging up and across, snapping for his neck like a wolf and making a sharp, high whistling noise that made Hannibal’s nostrils flare.

Hannibal took his time dodging a few more slashes and absorbing a couple more blows, then whipped sharply around and to the right of Cumtick, causing the man to twist and try to slash Hannibal at a very unfortunate angle, allowing the doctor to catch his wrist on the swing and incapacitate him further with a horrible *crack* from Hannibal's fist into Cumtick's temple.

The man wavered backwards, fighting the painful grip Hannibal had on his wrist, feeling his bones grind and bend in his opponent's iron hard fist. Cumtick felt his back hit a wall and knew he was in deep trouble and tried desperately to regain his vision. But after a lifetime of being just fast enough, he was now far too slow.

His vision cleared just in time for Hannibal's triumphant face to bloom into view as he plunged Cumtick's own loyal knife deep into his naval.

Hannibal smiled in bitter victory as the other man finally bestowed upon him the look of pure horror and shock that he felt he had been so far robbed of.

"*There*," he whispered approvingly as the other man started mouthing something.

Hannibal thought he may have been trying to say "*please*" and "*no*" and maybe "*somebody help me*," but he wasn't too sure. Did that count as his last words, then? He considered it briefly. No. Hannibal thought leaving it at "*wuh*" was infinitely funnier.

He stepped gracefully to the side and let the knife unzip Cumtick's stomach further, avoiding the gout of blood as much as possible. Shoes like these were very hard to come by.

A dry crackling noise issued from Cumtick's throat as he slid sideways down the wall and his insides threatened to spill out all over the dirty hallway floor. Hannibal merely tutted and dragged him further down the hall to the partially open shaft that had held a small freight elevator before it had been picked clean for parts.

He had only opened Cumtick far enough to allow access for the usual extractions. He pulled a pair of bright pink dishwashing gloves out of the vest pocket he had carefully folded them into and set about doing his real work.

It was more slow going than usual this time, because even though Cumtick was now quickly fading, he still attempted to struggle and fight every time Hannibal went to go stick his hand back into his stomach, and to be quiet honest, the man's insides were a jumbled, squelching train wreck.

Eventually however, Hannibal stopped having to swat away Cumtick's feebly grasping hand and acquired most of what he needed.

Hannibal hummed a song he himself had composed as he dragged the now unconscious man to the edge of the shaft.

He stared down at the ashen face of the man and freed one hand of its glove so he could retrieve the syringe full of stimulant from his other vest pocket. Junkies called this drug turbo, because it had the effect of skewing your perception of time, making everything surrounding the user seem slowed down dramatically, giving them numerous advantages.

Hannibal was a fan of it himself, as it had gotten him out of more than one hairy situation in the past. He never abused it, of course, but the effects habitual use had on the internal organs was just as devastating as it was fascinating.

He bent down and jabbed the needle into Cumtick's arm through his filthy sleeve and pushed the plunger, and seconds later the man's eyes blinked open. A second after that, he started to hyperventilate.

Hannibal craned his neck to get a better look at the man's terrified and disoriented face. He sighed impatiently.

"Tell me, did you even for one second realize that when I mentioned someone dying, I was intentionally foreshadowing your death, specifically?" Hannibal's tone was filled with disdain as his lip curled in disgust.

Cumtick merely goggled at him and made a long wheezing, keening noise.

Hannibal brightened slightly.

"Your voice has returned! Most fortunate. Then this won't be a total loss, after all. Please deliver a message to Fuckface for me? Tell him that when I find and kill his son, I'm going to feed him to the slaves he has pinned up in that little crusty hole he calls a kingdom."

Cumtick's eyes widened in fear with momentary comprehension and then Hannibal casually and unceremoniously pushed him over the edge of the shaft.

Hannibal slowly stood up, relishing the man's spastic scream that echoed and faded and then suddenly cut off brutally as confused shouts and cries started to softly float up to him from the two lower levels. This floor was mostly abandoned. The ones beneath it were not.

He mentally ticked off another place on his long list of convenient murder locales he had wanted to try.

He reluctantly turned to clean up and collect his mess as quickly as he could and had not seen one single person on his quiet stroll back to his office.

Upon returning to his kitchen and examining his trophies closer, it was worse than he had feared. He tossed the kidney immediately, it was beyond useless.

The liver, entering the early stages of cirrhosis, wasn't in much better condition. He hadn't expected it to be, but he had hoped it would at least be salvageable enough for cooking.

And, of course, he hadn't ever intended to feed this to himself or Abigail. There were still a few of his fellow board members on the Rivet City Council that regularly needed social maintenance. It always seemed to be the ones he despised, too. Either way, it all worked itself out.

He packaged the organ as best he could and set in in his locked and concealed deep freeze, where it would stay relatively safe until it was time to prepare it. After that he had retired to his office to attend to two patients and filed paperwork until Abigail came home.

Presently, as he replayed the incident in his mind, he satisfied himself that Abigail had probably fled the area as soon as it was apparent what was about to happen.

Still. He wondered when the day would come when she chose to stay. What would happen then? Would she truly come to fear and hate him? Would she remain just as loyal as she was now?

Or would she grow to resent him and turn away from him forever? He genuinely couldn't guess. Abigail was one of the few people who Hannibal could honestly say still surprised him every now and then.

Regardless, his only concern for her at the moment was to prepare her as best he could for life in the wasteland. He wasn't naive enough to believe she would change her mind about wanting to leave Rivet City when she came of age, and he didn't intend to stop her.

He just wanted to make sure she caused as much damage as she could when she did.

Knowing Abigail wouldn't be back before he left (she hated goodbyes), Hannibal jumped up and immediately set to work packing everything he needed for a journey of indeterminate distance and time.

These were his favorite types of furloughs, the ones where the unknown stretched out before him, the destination and outcome a complete mystery to him. He had left several times this way, chasing after someone he was almost positive emerged from a vault.

Every time thus far, however, the candidates have either revealed themselves to be a fraud, or have proven to be completely incompatible with Hannibal's end goals in one way or another.

Something in the back of Hannibal's mind was telling him this time was different, though. This subject had potential.

He seemed coherent, intelligent, and most importantly, durable. His mental state was up in the air of course, but then again, so was everyone else's.

Hannibal moved quickly and efficiently and was ready to head out within the hour. As a rule, he always traveled light. Despite his normally fastidious nature, he felt having too many items to deal with on a journey such as this was a huge inconvenience.

He knew Abigail would be alright, eventually, and would probably use all his handmade soap for bubble baths while he was gone, so he saved her the trouble of tearing his bathroom apart to look for it and simply sat a bottle on the tub and secreted one away for his return.

When he was satisfied that Abigail would have everything she needed while he was away, he locked up his office and headed down to the clinic wing to inform them of his departure.

"Ah, fuck," was all Jimmy Price said when he saw Hannibal in his standard drab wasteland gear.

"Jimmy, I'm going," Hannibal announced grandly.

"Going to what, I wonder, fucking *die*?" Jimmy shot back miserably. He turned and threw the instrument he had in his hand on the work table beside Cumtick's still ragged corpse.

Hannibal smiled proudly as Brian Zeller skidded into view and nearly toppled a medical tool cart.

"Ah! Hannibal! You're *cheesin* it again, huh? *Excellent*!" Zeller looked around frantically as Jimmy made a disgusted noise.

"I don't know how long I'll be gone this time, I'm afraid. Do you have a list for me?"

Hannibal asked as he watched Zeller scatter papers and equipment as he searched for what he was looking for among Jimmy's immaculately kept workspaces.

Jimmy was doing an admirable job of ignoring him, Hannibal thought. He must have been practicing like he had suggested.

Jimmy Price had grown up in a place called Canterbury Commons, and when Hannibal had passed through there on one of his sabbaticals, Jimmy had begged him to take him with him back to Rivet City and teach him the medical trade.

Hannibal had politely but firmly refused. Jimmy had followed Hannibal for days across the wasteland, popping up at inopportune times and pestering him about an apprenticeship all the way back to Rivet City. Dr. Jimmy Price had turned out to be the best student Hannibal had ever taught.

And whether he liked it or not, Zeller was now turning out to be Jimmy's.

Jimmy was shaking his head at Hannibal, who was now leaning elegantly against the doorframe.

"Jimmy, as your therapist I would advise that you get whatever you have to say out of your system," Hannibal said warmly.

"You think this is just *so* fucking funny, don't you? You leave, the clinic gets backlogged, Princess nearly kills someone, the Council gets all snippy, there's no guarantee you'll *even* come back, and all the while, I have to deal with *THIS*," Jimmy flailed a hand in Zeller's direction as the latter knocked over a specimen jar onto a very important looking notebook.

Hannibal smiled wider. "Jimmy, you have no one to blame-"

"*But myself*, I know, I know, I still have the pillow you embroidered that on for my graduation ceremony gift," Jimmy sneered as he turned away and back to the corpse he was examining.

Zeller whooped triumphantly as he found a small coffee stained memo pad and ripped out the top sheet. "Here, it's here! The only thing we really need is forceps. We go through those things like bandages! Uh, actually, we need those pretty bad, too."

Hannibal examined the list briefly. He saw the usual random joke items were included as well. Zeller always insisted he needn't bother, but somehow Hannibal always managed to find every item on the list, no matter how obscure.

"Thank you Brian, I'll do my best, as always. Jimmy, I can't thank you enough for covering for me while I'm gone," he called as he backed out the door and into the cacophonous hallway.

Jimmy didn't look back but he did flip Hannibal off with one messy gloved hand.

After a brief circuit of the marketplace, unknowingly visiting the same exact stalls and vendors as his quarry did only an hour ago, Hannibal was scaling the staircase to the outside when he ran into Harkness.

"Dr. Lecter! You're heading out? So soon after the last time?" Harkness chuckled merrily.

Hannibal scoffed inwardly. It had been almost *three months*. And even now, Not-Jack had at least an hour on him. He needed to move.

"I'm afraid so. Keep an eye on Princess for me while I'm away, won't you?"

"You ask me that every time, and I'm never quite sure how to interpret it," Harkness said with a shake of his head. "Listen, just do me a favor, alright? Come back in better shape than usual, this time." He paused, hesitated, then: "Jimmy prays for you at night, you know."

Hannibal paused for a moment.

"I didn't think Jimmy was particularly religious," He mused.

"He's not, he's just superstitious, which is arguably worse."

"Arguably," Hannibal hummed thoughtfully.

He smiled, nodded, and promised nothing as he whipped up the steps and out the door.

Chapter End Notes

That's right, surprise ship on a ship! Please leave all complaints about character placement in the box to the left, thank you.

Chapter Soundtrack: Mads Mikkelsen humming Eine Kleine Nachtmusik in your head

f o r e v e r

FINALLY. FUCK.

Chapter Summary

Heads up, my first draft is usually also my final draft.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will had waited until he was out of sight of Rivet City to set down his new satchel (*now with cohesion*!) and fish out his Pip-Boy. It made him nervous not to have access to the advantages the small but hefty wrist-mounted module offered while inside the city.

It also made him nervous that two people on the outside had already tried to kill him for it and even the nicer people he had encountered kept trying to steal it right off his arm.

He sighed with relief the second he had enveloped his left wrist with the small machine and engaged the clasps. He felt the electrode pads on the wrist strap catch contact with his skin and reminded himself he needed to clean them later. As he booted it up, information in the form of faint symbols and text flooded his field of vision and he tried to glean as much information from it as possible.

The compass in the lower left hand side showed him he was currently facing northwest, the direction he estimated he was going to have to travel for the next day or two. Directly above the compass was Will's overall health status. The bar was at max level and Will smiled. That was one thing to be grateful for, at least.

In the opposite corner, however, the information wasn't so helpful. The bar labeled AP was a bit of a mystery to him.

He knew the vault had Pip-Boy classes that would teach you what everything meant and how it all worked, but Will had never reached the level of satisfactory test results needed to be selected for them like the eldest member of his dorm had. Will had been secretly grateful for this because after the man, Fred, had left for the classes, he had never returned.

Underneath whatever AP was, there was an indicator for the condition of any weapon being used and what ammunition was available. Seeing as how he wasn't currently holding anything, the space was empty.

This area always confused Will and his dorm mates. Why in the hell did they need to know that much information about weapons? They were never allowed unsupervised access to anything sharper than a pair of safety scissors. Spadesy had been fascinated by the possibilities. A little too fascinated. And on that last night....

Will shook his head free of the images that writhed angrily inside it like a beehive inside a a goldfish bowl and reached down to touch Lucky, his trusty tire iron, for comfort.

Immediately the weapon condition bar flickered and showed Lucky to still be in almost pristine condition. Will sighed again and brought the Pip-Boy's closer to his face to better see the dusty screen in the fiery afternoon light.

The current menu showed a helpful but bizarrely up-to-date map, revealing every area close by in sickly green text that was sometimes garbled or corrupted in places.

This was the screen he preferred to keep it on, as it was the one he used the most. He nevertheless flipped over to the next menu to check his more in depth health details. His limbs were fine, obviously, and thanks to some newly purchased RadAway, his radiation levels were sitting contentedly at zero.

He had surprised himself completely by not feeling an ounce of guilt at all the items Tenpenny had just paid for. Will wasn't sure if he had just reached an emotional limit, or if he simply hated the man, but he had not put too much care into sparing any expense.

He looked down at his now bulging bag and mentally inventoried a few acquisitions yet again to reassure himself that things were going to be easier this time, because now, like an actual proper wasteland adventurer, he was *outfitted*.

The five stimpacks he had been lucky enough to find would heal any wound he had at supernatural speed, but could only do so much. He still had to be careful. The Rad-X would help prevent radiation from being absorbed by his body. He had been momentarily tempted to try some more of the stronger chems, but he had seen enough dead junkie corpses to clog the Potomac and he wasn't going to chance liking them too much.

He now focused his attention to a normally-barely-noticeable space between his compass and health bars. Small red dots skittered back and forth jerkily in the slot and Will pulled the item he had been most excited about out of the spare shirt inside his front satchel pocket.

He had been eyeing the pair of binoculars sitting in Seagrave's booth since his first day in the marketplace, but they had always been too expensive. Probably because they had come fresh out of a box and were in near perfect condition.

He smiled as he looked through the lenses at the source of the red dots jittering around on his early warning system for enemies: radroaches were investigating a heap of rotting food down the hill from where Will stood watching. Radroaches never really gave Will any trouble, despite being roughly the size of a Jack Russell Terrier. He had heard stories from other wasters that they would sometimes drag small children away, but he doubted it. Most likely something their mothers had told them when they were little to keep them from wandering off.

Still, it was better to keep your distance, unless you were desperately hungry, which Will had been in the past, unfortunately.

After he had satisfied himself that the way was clear, at least for a little bit, he had very carefully stowed away his binoculars and made his way west around the giant mutated bugs and after a while, further north, checking every now and then for enemies and plotting the safest route possible.

Even though he marveled at how fast he was now moving thanks to his newest acquisition, he knew it was still going to be a long and dangerous trek.

Avoiding the super mutants wasn't that hard. Despite being huge, hulking, savage green-skinned killing machines, they were incredibly stupid, and Will didn't think he would have a hard time escaping them out in the open. They also tended to stay in one place for the most part, and Will slipped by their regular hangouts with ease.

The raiders were somewhat of a problem, if only because they were also human. Thank god they were usually too zooted out of their minds on chems and were more interested in sex and partying than patrolling their wide territories.

In the end, really, Will was most worried about Talon Company. The ruthless group of anything-goes mercenaries wouldn't hesitate to use Will for target practice, or even worse, capture and torture him to death. Even more, he had seen it happen to some hapless innocents already, and wasn't sure he could hold back from interfering next time, even though he knew it would most likely end in his death.

Last time he had been unarmed and in shock. This time he figured he could take at least a couple of them out with him.

He had made it approximately a quarter of the way to his destination when dusk started to settle in. Will pushed on until slightly after it had gotten too dark to see on a gamble and was rewarded with the silhouette of an overturned and burned out truck shell he had been hoping was still standing and quickly made a nest for himself under the rusted bed in the back.

He slept lightly, as he always did, and woke up just after dawn to find an unexpected surprise in the morning fog: he had camped right beside a small creek with a rather clean looking waterfall. Not knowing when he would get his next chance, he pushed down his urge to get back on the road as soon as possible and allowed himself a rare bath, checking the radiation levels in the water intermittently and trying not to die from whatever the opposite of spontaneous combustion was.

Besides the food, the thing Will most desperately missed about the vault was the dorm bathrooms. It boggled his mind now to remember that at one time, long ago, he had been allowed to take as long and as hot a shower as he pleased, as many times a day as he wanted, granted it didn't interfere with studies or lab tests.

Now he was shivering violently but was happy that he now had a chance to change clothes. He carefully transferred his binoculars over to his dirty shirt and shorts and gratefully swapped into his cleaner set. He unfurled his spare powder blue RobCo jumpsuit and wrestled himself into it, managing to only topple over once this time.

He had tried to wear "*normal*" clothes for a few days, but found the worker's coveralls to be more warm and comforting. At least they weren't as noticeable and gaudy as his vault suit. Even if they did smell like feet nachos.

Will stretched thoroughly and jogged in place to wring out the last of the chill in his bones and ate his breakfast (one of Gary's mystery danishes) on the go. For most of the morning, he was able to make good time, because the part of the highway that he was currently following was regularly patrolled by a group of Regulators, and was relatively safe.

The Regulators were a highly outfitted merc group that declared themselves the unofficial *law of the land*, but Will knew they were just glorified bounty hunters.

That wasn't to say he didn't respect the shit out of them, though. The first time he had encountered members in this area (three women to be exact), he had seen that the dots that showed up on his Pip-Boy menu were green, and not red, like with enemies, indicating that they meant no immediate threat to Will.

When they had merely waved their strange brown cowboy hats at him and continued walking in the opposite direction, their leather dusters flapping in ragged tatters around their legs, he had been so bewildered he had almost had to sit down for a moment. As he continued down the road, however, he had seen why they were in no real mood to interact: five super mutants lay in a blasted ruin on the side of the road, their massive corpses already starting to burn in the fire the women had just set.

Since then, any time he had come across a Regulator out in the wastes, he had tried his best to aid them in any small way he could. He supposed it was paying off now, as he watched a lone male Regulator pace him on the crest of a hill to keep an eye out for enemies or obstructions.

Although grateful for the silent company, Will was starting to feel uncomfortable by noon as the man still followed him well out of range of his colleagues, mostly because he felt he had put him out enough as it was, but the man also seemed to be enjoying himself in his break in monotony, so Will tried to let it go.

Finally, the man whistled, shouted something friendly in Spanish, and waved as he turned back east. Will returned the salute and watched as he vanished over the horizon.

Alone again, Will sighed and trekked on further north this time, trying to give the raider hive where he had killed Fuckface as wide a berth as possible. Unfortunately, he still had another mile to slog through before he would feel comfortable resting for the day, and it was a rough mile. Several close calls with raiders and one uneventful tangle with a bloatfly later, he had finally neared his destination.

That night as he lay exhausted, high up on the roof of a ruined but surprisingly sturdy gas station, he wondered idly about what exactly Tenpenny needed this module for, anyway. All it did was configure the framework for an entire security system, streamline it, and relegate the controls to a mainframe to help with security issues, usually in the form of surveillance cameras and passcode doors.

Logic would dictate that Tenpenny was simply using it to better protect this tower of his, as it could feasibly be used for a strangely intricate security web for a residential building, even though it would normally be used for certain sectors of the government, such as water treatment plants and utility tunnels.

But that didn't seem very likely, as the interface was largely internal, not external.

As he turned over on his back to see if he would be lucky enough to catch small patches of stars through the heavy cloud cover (something that had strangely terrified him when he had first emerged), he bit his lip and once again considered asking the strange hooded man that had been following him since Rivet City.

It wasn't like he was insulted or anything. In fact, it made perfect sense that Tenpenny would want insurance that Will hadn't simply filled his bag up with expensive bullshit and made a break for some other region to start a new life or something.

Not that he had thought of this, or anything.

Will grumbled and turned on his side, back in the direction where the man must be camping, and wondered if he was watching him, even now. So far, the stranger had been keeping his distance, either in an attempt to be stealthy, or polite. Will didn't know which.

The fact that he had been mostly staying just out of range of his Pip-Boy scanner seemed to point to the former, rather than the latter.

Still, his indicator dot had remained steadily green the few times he had gotten within the radar's reach.

Twice Will had almost doubled back and confronted the man, if for no other reason than to invite him to possibly travel together for safety and company, and to learn more about his new employer and his tower. He had opted not to in the end, however, just in case this was considered unprofessional.

That night as he dozed fitfully, he dreamed of his dorm and of his only friend and remembered the look on his face as blood had splattered it and left him unrecognizable. He had awoken with a start in the cold and windy semidarkness of sunrise, unsure if he had shouted the name out loud or just in his dream.

He begrudgingly got up and started packing his meager camp gear immediately, not knowing how long he needed to get in and out of the city with what he had been sent after. He knew most of his time in the area was more than likely going to be spent underground and he had made peace with that. Being canned up under tons of dirt and rock was old hat for him.

What he was dreading was the possibility that he wasn't going to be coming out with clean hands this time. As he made his way along the last little bit of road leading to Fairfax Ruins, he psyched himself up as best he could.

He was fairly confident in his ability to stay out of trouble out here in the open, where he always had countless options for escape routes. Underground, however, there were very few

alternatives left besides combat when confronted by an enemy. Raiders tended to not want to talk things out.

He had just finished his breakfast as he crested the hill that led down into the ruins and he immediately made a beeline for a slight cliff to the west that overlooked the smaller buildings and would allow him to scout out a good portion of the city before he slipped in.

After taking care of a few minor precautions, he finally felt comfortable enough to start working out the first hurdle of his plan.

He crouched, pulling out his binoculars and adjusting the left diopter a bit to correct the focus before squinting through the lenses and wincing slightly. It would appear he had found the *Welcome* sign that had been mentioned in Tenpenny's debriefing. Rotting limbs and viscera slopped down a billboard that had once advertised some kind of fast food place but now only read *HI CUNTS* in tall letters made out of random body parts.

Below this frankly derivative art piece, several raiders sat languidly around a car husk sharpening blades and waiting for their patrol duty to be over so they could finally get wasted again. Further in, there seemed to be some sort of dispute, as three raiders fought and bit at each in a roiling mess in a completely worn out street intersection as five more cheered them on nearby. Or maybe raiders just did that sometimes.

Will's eyes tracked several possible routes he could use to get approximately where he needed, but most of them would require far too much effort and he needed both efficiency and precision for this job. He sighed.

"If you could stop just *there*, please," he called out to the figure advancing on him from behind in as friendly and polite a tone as he could manage.

Hannibal stopped immediately and smiled, surprised that the younger man had picked up on him before he had even gotten within twenty yards of his exposed back, despite being upwind. He knew the Pip-Boy he was wearing wouldn't have shown him any enemies he wasn't directly facing, and he had wanted to see just how perceptive he was on his own. He found himself to be the exact opposite of disappointed.

He cleared his throat.

"Please forgive me, my intentions were in no way meant to be threatening. I merely wished to remain as quiet as possible. This area is very perilous, as you can see," Hannibal called back merrily, making no attempt to make it sound anything like an apology.

Still looking through his binoculars, Will mouthed the word *perilous* and wondered just where this hell this guy must have come from.

He had heard a veritable shit ton of accents since he had left the vault, but none of them had sounded like this. The stranger's voice was level and calm. He seemed to speak carefully, but it wasn't due to insecurity.

“I’m guessing Tenpenny sent you? That’s fine. But I’m not a thief. I’ll get what he wants to him,” Will growled out defensively. Just because he understood the precaution, didn’t mean it didn’t piss him off slightly.

Hannibal smiled wider and briefly considered latching on to this concept as a ruse to gain further information from the other man, and possibly a little authority over him. The very idea of even pretending to work for Tenpenny was too disgusting an idea for him, however, and he quickly amended the misunderstanding.

“I’m not too worried in that regard. I have full faith in you. I do not, however, work for Tenpenny,” Hannibal called out.

Will frowned at that and finally turned to look at the stranger that had been stalking him for the last day and a half through the world’s shittiest wildlife park.

The man was tall and stood confidently and gracefully, but otherwise nothing special stood out about him to Will other than the dark gray substance smeared liberally around his eyes, giving him a gaunt, dangerous look.

The light gray hood he was wearing glowed around his head like a sickly halo, but it also cast most of his face in shadow.

“Then why the hell are you following me?” Will shouted back, unbothered with the noise because the wind was carrying it away from the city.

“Perhaps we are simply traveling in the same direction?” Hannibal offered irrationally.

Will wanted to scream at the sky.

“Why do I get the feeling you’ve not said one honest thing to me since this conversation started?” Will barked tiredly.

The man’s lower face broke out into a carnivorous smile and suddenly Will’s suspicions were confirmed.

“You’re the man from Rivet City, aren’t you? The one from the clinic.”

Hannibal straightened slightly with pride and nodded.

“You creep me out a little,” Will admitted suddenly. It didn’t seem to bother the other man at all. In fact, he tilted his head up charmingly and, infuriatingly, winked.

“I was quite impressed with how you handled Cumtick. I believe he had reason to be substantially cross with you,” Hannibal congratulated. “You managed to settle the dispute rather conclusively in the end, I hear? Bit of good luck with that alibi, as well. How much did that cost you, exactly?”

Will made a disgruntled noise that drifted back to Hannibal on the dusty breeze.

"*I. Did not. Kill him*," Will breathed out loudly, wondering why he was even bothering. The other man tutted.

"Didn't you? Well, why not, if I might ask? You very likely would have gotten away with it," Hannibal yelled conversationally.

"Because I'm not-" Will spat spastically before he gave up. This wasn't the time or the place. He had shit to do. "Listen, I'm not trying to be rude, but if you could kindly tell me what you need from me, I'd appreciate it. I've got a long day ahead of me, already."

The fact that this man was boldly standing upright, in the open, right next to a city full of raiders, was giving Will serious secondhand anxiety.

"I merely wish to repay you for your disposing of Fuckface and Cumtick," Hannibal shouted simply. "They were deplorable men and you made the wasteland a better place by killing them."

Will stared at the man for a long time. His face was suddenly earnest, and Will's heart desperately wanted to believe it. However.

"That's not real. That's not a thing. Not out here," Will shouted back flatly. "There's something else, isn't there? What do you really want?"

Will refused to believe someone could just want to help him out for doing a good deed that had somehow indirectly effected them. Anything anyone ever did out here always had a price tag attached to it.

But that's not true is it? Something inside Will whispered. Gary wasn't just bored. The Regulators hadn't given Will a personal bodyguard because they had the extra manpower to spare. Princess could have left him to hang but she hadn't, for whatever reason.

A darkness had fallen over the other man's face and Will's stomach took a quick trip to the ballroom just from the very look on it. The man cocked his head to the side coldly.

"Tell me, did you happen to free the children that Fuckface had pinned up in his little fort? I imagine you had other pressing matters to attend to, of course, but I was hoping perhaps you had at least managed to get around to it after the dust had settled," Hannibal called out, not really bothering to hide anything boiling to the surface in his voice.

Will heard the savage anger underlying his mostly conversational tone, and suddenly he understood.

They gazed steadily at one another through the dirt kicked up by the relentless wind. Will finally sighed.

"I did. I told them to stay put while I made sure the area was clear but when I came back I couldn't find them. I don't know where they went. Did one of them belong to you?" Will called gently.

The other man shook his head and Will relaxed slightly.

“No. But I’ll thank you just the same as if one had,” he said warmly, thinking of Abigail. “And I wouldn’t worry. They most likely knew exactly where they were going. Probably knew better than you did. Megaton isn’t so far away, after all,” Hannibal soothed.

Will tried to be comforted by this instead of slightly insulted, and he groaned audibly as he rubbed at his eyes with the palms of his hands.

“*Alright*! *Listen*! If you are *genuinely* comfortable doing it, I *could* actually really use some help right now. I’m on a retrieval mission at the moment and it’s going to be a real bitch. I have an idea that might help but it might be easier as a two-man job,” Will acquiesced finally. This guy still didn’t fully track, but Will didn’t exactly have time to check his references right now. Being a resident and possibly even a doctor in Rivet City would simply have to suffice for the time being.

“Surely it would be better to discuss the plan in a way that didn’t involve shouting at one another?” Hannibal hazarded as he raised his hands slowly to either side to show he wasn’t immediately armed. “Friends?”

Will grimaced.

“No. But you can come closer, I guess. Watch out, there’s a frag mine to your immediate right. And another one a bit to the left,” he said in a tone that was trying not to sound too apologetic.

Hannibal looked down and after a moment, pretended to spot the explosive for the first time.

“Ah. Yes. Well done. Would you like me to collect them for you?” Hannibal asked brightly.

Will sighed again. “Yes, if you wouldn’t mind. They’re the only two I have at the moment,” he called.

He could hear the tall man humming pleasantly as he quickly disarmed both proximity weapons and sauntered over to where Will was crouching. Will could now see his face more clearly now and marveled at his distinctive bone structure, the way it shifted continuously in the different lighting and made the man look kind one second, and cruel the next. It was hard not to stare.

As he stooped down a respectable distance away from Will, Hannibal leaned in carefully and handed the frag mines back to the wary man and unashamedly looked him up and down like a curious bird of prey.

Will merely blinked at him and tried not to resent the fact that the other man’s knees hadn’t cracked loudly on the way down.

“I presume you’re planning on trying to get into the city as unnoticed as humanly possible?” Hannibal said finally as he turned his attention towards the crumbling mass of buildings, squinting with amusement at the makeshift welcome banner.

Will huffed as he stowed the mines away in his bag with extra special care.

“Well, getting into the city unnoticed is the easy part. I don’t really need help with that,” Will said unselfconsciously as he secured the straps on his bag.

Hannibal smiled and simply nodded, believing him.

“Once I get in there, though, it would be really helpful if all the raiders suddenly found themselves...*needed elsewhere*, if you catch my drift,” Will purred darkly.

Hannibal did indeed catch it. He hummed agreeably and smirked, already sifting through countless possibilities for mayhem.

“How long will you need?” The taller man asked.

Will bit at his bottom lip for a moment.

“That’s the thing, I don’t really have any way of knowing,” he admitted softly. “I need to get to the main utility tunnels for the sewer system. According to my intel (*Hannibal snorted softly at that*), the room I need will be on the far side of the city. I was hoping I could travel underground for most of the way there, because according to Tenpenny, they prefer to use the tunnels for drug dens and waste disposal. I think it’s my best bet.”

Hannibal nodded immediately in agreement.

“I’ll give you time to get clear and see if I can’t draw their attention topside and to the south as much as possible,” he murmured thoughtfully.

“I appreciate it,” Will said, and meant it. He was curious as to how the man was going to go about creating a distraction but time was getting short. “I’ll be leaving most of my stuff here. Promise you won’t go looking through it?” He asked lightly, only half joking.

“Very well,” was all the other man said with a chuckle. They stared at one another for a moment longer.

“I’m Jack, by the way,” Will said and offered his hand.

The other man looked very pleased at the gesture suddenly and took Will’s hand in his warm grip.

“Klaus,” Hannibal replied jovially.

Will didn’t so much as blink at the peculiar name. He had killed people with much weirder ones, after all.

“Hm. I’m guessing you’re not at all like the Saint?” Will supposed as he smiled bitterly.

Hannibal smirked at that.

“No. Not at all like the Saint,” the man agreed slowly. His lip curled up viciously and one large canine tooth glittered in the morning sun.

Will felt something warm swoop in his lower stomach and he quickly turned to gather the few things out of his bag that he felt he could get away with carrying with him into the tunnels.

"Alright. Good luck with your side of things. If I don't come back out by tonight, I'm dead. You can have everything in my bag but the binoculars. Could you take those back to Rivet City for me? Give them to the little girl called Princess and tell her to use them to keep an eye out for actual *real* Enclave agents," Will finished darkly.

Hannibal had gone very still suddenly and was looking at Will with an unreadable expression.

He had just opened his mouth to say something when Will held up a hand defensively to stop him.

"I *know*, *okay*, but she helped me. Tell her it's her fee for the alibi."

Hannibal smiled slowly and nodded.

"I can do that. I'll wait for your return here, I think. I wish you silent movement and swift thoughts on your journey," he intoned formally as both men stood and started walking towards the outer reaches of the city below in dreamlike synchronicity.

Will's eyes narrowed at the strange toast to his own luck as he diverged from his new ally and started down the rocky hill towards the heavily barricaded ruins. Decades of fortifications by past residents had turned the previously open layout of the city into an almost inaccessible castle of rebar and rubble.

If Will had wanted to enter the city effortlessly, he would have had to waltz up to one of the very few entrance points around the decrepit metropolis and come up with the best vaudeville act this century to persuade the raider guards to let him pass.

Who's to say I couldn't do that, though? Came a voice from somewhere deep within him.

He pushed the thought down quickly and cringed at the bravado he had just felt. What the hell was that? Was he thinking of trying to show off for Klaus or something?

He turned around briefly and caught sight of the man now standing boldly on the ridge, his shawl blowing around his head and shoulders gracefully, the sun beating down on his slightly upturned face as he watched Will make his way down to the walls of the closest building.

Up on the hill, Hannibal watched in immense satisfaction as the younger man slinked like a Savannah cat down to the barricade border before turning to check on him momentarily.

Hannibal nodded ever so slightly and the other man raised his hand in a possibly final salute.

He then turned and faced the building he had apparently decided was going to be his way in. Rubble and barbed wire encroached on the bottom and sides where past barricades had given way to damage and decay.

Hannibal watched in genuine excitement as Will wrapped Fuckface's old cloak around himself tighter and secured the straps to keep it from falling loose and catching on something jagged. He stretched all of his limbs almost lazily and Hannibal smiled in appreciation of his care for his muscles and general health. He would have to see to it that he started eating better than what Gary's putrid selection allowed. He needed someone who was built to last, after all.

Will then surprised Hannibal completely by turning and running full tilt at the outside wall, launching himself off a large chunk of concrete, and using the momentum to just barely grapple an overhanging support strut for the air conditioning ductwork that clung to the side of the building like a desiccated lizard carcass.

Will quickly managed to wrestle himself into position enough to find purchase on the main vent and immediately started moving.

Hannibal's lips parted in something that felt dangerously like dismay as Will used the vent to scale the rest of the three story building like a shadow and disappeared up and over the roof in what must have been less than thirty seconds.

Hannibal coughed out a single surprised laugh as he stared at the last place he had seen Will before he had disappeared around an industrial cooling fan unit.

He wasn't too worried about him, to be honest, and his only concern was that he came out more or less in one piece. Everything else, he could just leave to him.

Hannibal turned back north and plotted out his own path through the city, one that would not be so precise as to warrant binoculars.

Chapter End Notes

You guys I think Hannibal might have peeked at Will bathing....and saw his 🍑🙈

You guys are going to have fun when I try to write sex scenes lmao.

Chapter Soundtrack: In Hell I'll Be In Good Company - The Dead South.

Mr. Boombasticcc 💥🤯

Chapter Summary

Jimmy isn't in this 😔

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will had crested the top of the building as quickly and quietly as he could, all too aware of the numerous red dots milling about to the west of him. Mysteriously, in front of him were several green ones.

The building itself seemed empty, as far as he could tell, but it was still standing, and that was what had sold it in the end, for him. The roof had also been untouched for the most part. Everything, including valuable equipment and wiring, had been left as it had been the day the bombs dropped.

Small bleached bones left by decades of birds and rodents littered the ground and Will had to be careful not to tread on them as he negotiated the many cooling and heating units dotting the top level.

He cautiously stepped closer to the raised facade of the front of the building and took in the immediate area as quickly as possible.

He was on the last row of what appeared to be small business offices and shops, one side of the street leading off into the west into what looked like another intersection.

The street heading east, however, had forever been cut off by rubble. He was in a dead end. That wasn't necessarily a bad thing, however.

Peering over the ledge slowly, he finally understood why this building block was mostly abandoned, and discovered the source of the inexplicable green dots. It appeared that the raiders here had somehow knocked enough brain cells together collectively to fashion a sort of ramshackle pen for a giant mole rat farm.

At least twelve of the large mutant animals trundled about, miserably clawing at the rusty metal sheets that had been laid down to prevent their escape through the asphalt.

Will felt a pang of sympathy for the poor ugly creatures as he imagined their sensitive skin reddening under the weak sun and harsh winds, day after day, until they were killed and eaten.

His anger flared suddenly. He knew what it was like to be pinned in one spot against your will for indefinite amounts of time, regardless of how much it caused you to suffer.

He was just angrily rearranging his schedule in his head to allot for time for freeing them and getting them to safety when he realized he might not have to:

On the far end of the pen, held down firmly by the back tire of a ravaged but still mostly whole motorcycle, was what Will had hoped he wouldn't have had to spend all morning looking for.

The manhole cover looked bigger than what he had seen previously, meaning it was most likely for a utility tunnel for maintenance. Will's heart was pumping very quickly now, as this

new development was shaving possible hours off of his time.
But how to get down there. Will stooped and started casing for a safe point he could use to scale down to the ground level without breaking a limb.

He quickly found a spot where he could easily wedge himself between this building and the next and lower himself down to a protruding ledge that adorned the front half of the facade. From there, there was a serviceable portion of the fire escape connecting the two buildings together that ended in a rather soft final landing on what looked like piles of discarded clothing. Perfect.

He had only brought one stimpack with him in Fuckface's cloak, and he knew one wrong step, one unwarranted risk, could be the end to his short life of freedom.

That's why he was very shocked and alarmed to watch his hand reach out and grab an entangled banner rope attached to an overhead anchor pole on the edge of the building and wind it securely around his fist.

He then dreamily and curiously observed himself, almost as if on autopilot, step up to the edge of the roof, step off confidently into nothing, and swing gracefully and stoically to a neighboring street light of dubious stability.

Strangely, he swore he heard someone humming.

His legs went cold and numb as he felt himself casually clasp the cold metal, swing around from inertia and loop gracefully around the wobbly, screeching pole, over and over again, all the way down to the ground in the closest corner of the mole rat pen, where he landed solidly and poised, kicking up small plumes of dust and shaking internally.

His mind felt like it was suddenly racing, but it was all so fast and chaotic it might as well have been empty. Black images, slick images, roiling, indistinct. On top of all of that: a word? No. A name. Loud. But he couldn't feel it, didn't even know what letters-
He snapped out of it suddenly and coherence came crashing back down on him like a freezing deluge and he practically gasped in a lungful of air and doubled over in terror and confusion.

What was that? What was that?! That wasn't me! Will screamed in his own head.

Typically, his mind refused to answer.

And even more, he had bigger things to worry about. That little strip tease for death was very elegant but it wasn't exactly subtle. If Klaus wasn't working his magic yet, he might have to prepare for any raiders in the vicinity that were close enough to have heard that. He had to move fast.

Will ran across the length of the pen to the blocked manhole cover and studied the motorcycle pinning it down. To his relief, there was nothing special to it, really.

It appeared they had it set up so that they could unblock the entrance to the sewers when they ran out of meat and close it off again after they had lured enough mole rats up onto the surface.

Will's heart dented from the very thought of it.

He looked over to the creatures in question, all now huddled in a corner out of fear from the sudden and alarming appearance of the strange hairy man from the sky.

He smiled and squatted down to appear less threatening.

"Hey guys. How does a little family reunion sound?" He said in as friendly a tone as possible, knowing it probably didn't matter.
He positioned himself carefully and got to work: even with half of it gone, the motorcycle was still immensely heavy.

As he struggled with the bike, he noticed that the mole rats had started to creep towards him slowly. Were mole rats hostile? He had never gotten close enough to one to know for

sure, but their indicator dots, like now, were always green, so he hoped not.

He had finally edged the back tire off the cover enough to pry it open when he noticed that the mole rats had gotten to within a few feet of him and were politely gathered in a circle around him, watching with bright interest as he huffed and toiled.

One malnourished pup was even brave enough to sidle up to him as he rested and snuffled gently at his hand, causing him to chuckle at the tickle of its whiskers.

"Ok, wish us luck." He said unselfconsciously to his enraptured audience and brought out Lucky to wrestle with the cover. The little one flinched slightly and Will's throat closed for a moment.

After a surprisingly little amount of effort, he managed to finally hoist the lid up and out- and he was immediately and violently knocked back several feet as a practical flood of rough, pink skin flowed past him like a river as the mole rats funneled smoothly into the open hole.

Will laughed heartily as he sat back watching them in surprised delight.

"By all means! Beauty before age, I guess!" He chuckled as he got to his feet and dusted himself off.

He sobered as he approached the void, himself, however. He watched as the last stubby tail disappeared deep into the darkness. Back to work. Will took a deep breath and got into position to lower himself onto the stairs and paused when only his top half remained topside. He inhaled deeply to savor the last potential fresh air he would be getting for a while and looked to the perpetually murky heavens. Seeing the sun break through would be hoping for too much, he reckoned.

He wondered how Klaus was making out and looked in the direction he imagined he might be for a moment. He saw that devilish smile again in his mind's eye, the sharp fang glinting, the bridge of his nose crinkling, his dark eyes clear and alive in a way nobody else's had ever been. It worried him slightly. And was he worried for Klaus? Or the raiders?

He knew when he had looked into the man's eyes that there was something profoundly dark in him. It was different from the heated, chaotic danger he had seen in others. This wasn't your standard wasteland mean. This was guided, cold, carefully packaged and precisely organized cruelty.

He wondered if Klaus also saw what was in him; saw what he had done. He wondered if the strange man might be able to help him.
He resolved to ask him if he ever saw him again.

With something like hope in his chest, he silently wished Klaus luck, slid the manhole cover back into place with a metallic thud, and descended into darkness.

———

As it turns out, Klaus was making out just fine.

Better than he had hoped, in fact. He was currently sitting with a bloodied lip in the dirt with his hands tied behind his back as seven raiders fought over what to do with the bumbling idiot scholar that had stumbled, dehydrated and delirious, right up to the west entrance and had mumbled and stuttered incoherently about trying to find his way back to the Institute, and could they possibly be so kind as to give him directions?

After a moment of bewildered staring, one had punched him square in the face and they had immediately set about restraining him and inventorying and doling out all of his earthly possessions.

They had done well to begin with, managing to find two of his eight knives, and one was now even wearing his prized opal lapel pin that Abigail had gifted him, saving Hannibal the

small task of deciding who was first.

But now they were arguing heatedly over how best to utilize the man; one group had wanted to use him to produce drugs for them indefinitely, as he was obviously smart, and had several chems on him already.

The other camp, however, was of the opinion that you needn't be smart to make drugs, the man they were currently enslaving for that very purpose was dumb as fuck, and he was going to last at least a few more weeks, and wouldn't it be funnier to stuff this one full of explosives and use him as a lure trap for that deathclaw that had been harassing them, lately?

The only downside to this, however, seemed to be that they had done that so much that it was beginning to become boring. Hannibal sympathized with them. But time was of the essence. He cleared his throat groggily.

"If you could...*possibly* f-find it in y-y-your hearts to not do that, I'm t-*terribly* afraid of ex-p-plosives and f-f-fire, you see..." Hannibal moaned miserably as he slumped further forward.

They all looked at each other and smiled. Unseen by them, Hannibal also smiled.

Will had been using his Pip-Boy screen light to slowly make his way down the slimy rungs of the short ladder when his foot suddenly and solidly hit earth.

"*Ah*." Was all he said as he stepped gratefully onto the hard packed dirt hill that must have been the work of the constantly digging mole rats surrounding him. He supposed this was how it was so easy for them to gain access to the surface and wondered if he couldn't sabotage it somehow. Maybe later if he had time.

Will smiled despite himself at the delighted chirps and snorts of the reunited families and pushed forward down the dark tunnel, closer to the almost imperceptible light source he could just make out down the long echoing hall.

As he walked, not bothering to be too stealthy over the cacophony of the mole rats, he turned his head slightly and used his peripheral vision to see details better in the dark.

The expected wires and tubes snaked along the walls, broken and dangling here and there where a curious and hungry mole rat had been left disappointed and maybe a little electrocuted.

The distant light source flickered and Will froze, waiting. It flickered again and Will's heart rejoiced: artificial lighting. There was still power down here, it seemed.

Speeding up slightly, he neared an intersection and looked down at the glowing screen on his wrist. Sure enough, the Pip-Boy was mapping his progress reliably and mysteriously.

How useful he could say it was, though, that was up for debate. The tunnel to his right led to the [^Rb(7*?}7,yfxy@roOm and the tunnel directly in front of him apparently led to %jc:aintenan?&levezt%. .

He elected to go left, in the end, towards the weak light source and further into the city. He thought of Klaus again (he felt less like he was a million miles away from earth as he did), and hoped he hadn't ran into too much trouble.

Hannibal himself was currently dabbing at his bloodied lip and rummaging through the corpse in front of him to see if he was the specific raider he was looking for (its face was now missing, so it was a bit of a challenge), and managed to procure another mostly full butane

lighter for his troubles.

Moving onto the next one however, he finally found what he had been searching for and reached down and roughly tore his lapel pin off the ragged and filthy shirt of the man who's face was the only one he hadn't gotten to see as his throat was torn out. Mostly because it had been torn out through the back.

He had been satisfied with the effect on the others, at least, even if it had been disappointingly temporarily. He turned slightly to give the pile of dead bodies a stern look.

Having reclaimed all of his seized items plus what few useful things the raiders had on them, he now stood and surveyed the numerous incendiary and explosive elements that the raiders had been kind enough to deliver to him when he had asked.

———

Will had been slowly working his way roughly north-northeast for quite a while when he came to yet another T intersection stretching out to either side and finally hit a red dot coming from the tunnel leading to the right.

He immediately crouched and hugged the wall in reflex and assessed the situation quickly.

It was moving steadily towards him, so close that it even swayed slightly. His heart dropped as his identification of it most likely being a raider was confirmed by the steady tap of footsteps echoing throughout the tunnel.

Unfortunately, there was nowhere to hide and the light was nowhere dim enough to conceal his very definitive shape against the light gray walls.

His heart shattered. There was nothing for it. He didn't want to do this.

He inhaled deeply, slowly, and glided forward while at the same time reluctantly readying Lucky. It felt colder and heavier than usual.

———

Hannibal had killed ten more raiders throughout the city and his killing arm was now getting very sore. It was a lucky thing that the raiders here had somehow procured a large surplus of lighter fluid, because Hannibal needed quite a bit of it, it seemed. He was trying to work fast, but not too fast, ensuring that Jack got deep and far enough underground that he needn't worry about him in the upcoming incident. He cheerfully hummed as he worked and finally stood to admire his art. This was going to be very fun to watch. Hannibal smiled proudly to himself and turned to go.

———

Will steadied his crouched pace and managed to time it perfectly so that he met with the raider in a clash at the corner leading down the hall to his right and brought Lucky down on the left hand that was loosely gripping a gun lazily pointed vaguely forward.

The ruined gun hit the ground and slid with a spark as the raider's muffled scream exploded in Will's ears and he barely ducked the reflexively thrown elbow that could have very easily broken his nose if it had connected properly.

Instead, it only made their position ungainly and awkward.

He reacted instinctively then, throwing a powerful left hook directly into the raiders exposed lower jaw and sending whatever they were using for a helmet flying back down the tunnel with a thud.

Will's heart hit his throat as he realized the raider was a woman, and no, this wasn't a raider, this was a *scientist, she was wearing a lab coat and glasses, for God's sake, she wasn't a fighter, she was scared, she didn't want this, she had a gun and she was screaming at him to get back to his dorm and none of this was supposed to happen, they had protocols, god damn it, they had standards and then she pointed the gun at him and-*

Stars exploded in Will's head as the raider (yes, it was a raider, she was wearing rags now) slammed her good fist into his right cheek as he hesitated and blood filled his mouth, sobering him enough that when she tackled him, he was ready and rolled with it, and knew exactly what to do: dropping Lucky and grabbing her head (she didn't have much hair) he twisted as hard as he could, eliciting a strangled scream from the woman and forcing her to twist and abandon her grappling plan and then Will was on top of her with his knee holding her down and he took the opportunity to spit blood in her face to further incapacitate her.

She sputtered and bucked him off easily in a rage and Will felt a very unpleasant sensation: a blade being dragged viciously along Fuckface's sturdy cloak, narrowly missing Will's thigh and femoral artery. He jerked back in time to avoid another vicious flick of the blade, and caught her arm as she slashed at him horizontally in her already awkward position.

He used her momentum and pinned her down on her free arm and finally had a moment to see the situation clearly: she was young and didn't know how to fight properly and they had put her down here to keep her out of trouble. She wasn't a match for him, but she was in the way. He didn't want to hurt her. But it was time to end this.

Will's heart was now a void as he looked down into her panicked eyes, *and he saw her glasses were broken, and her hair was a tangled mess, he could feel the gun between them, cold and solid and if he moved even an inch, she could turn her wrist and blow a hole through him and that would be it, he had to stop her, he needed to get out of here, needed to find-*

The raider screamed in fury and Will grabbed Lucky (it always seemed to be close at hand) and brought it down with a horrible metallic thud on her head and then she was still.

Will half fell, half stumbled back to the wall opposite the raider and leaned against it, panting and trying not to dissolve into panic.

There was no need to check her pulse to make sure she was dead: the red dot that had marked her as his mortal enemy had winked out abruptly and horrifically the second Will had struck her.

And besides that, blood now poured from the dent in her forehead, the sight and sound of it dripping onto the ground causing Will to scramble in a sickened jittery panic to the end of the intersection and down the the hallway in the direction the raider had come from.

He sat down heavily and welded himself against the wall in a curled up wad and tried his breathing and calming techniques. Spades had always talked him through it...but Spades wasn't here now.

Still, Will tried hard to remember his low calming voice, the motions and phrases he had used. Tried to remember his face, the heavy warmth of his hands on his shoulders. But it wasn't coming to him. It wasn't working.

All he could see was a burning, hateful number: *thirteen*. It blazed like neon all over the ruined face of the girl he had just killed.

And then he had raised his head and opened his eyes to try to escape it.

And then he immediately realized something was very wrong.

The hallway where the dead raider now rested eternally was slowly but steadily being filled with an eerie green light. He heard a strange rhythmic metallic tapping: footsteps. But not bipedal. An animal of some sort? But he had just come from there; it had been completely

clear a moment ago.

Will's heart felt like it was about to explode as the footsteps crept steadily closer and now he could hear a rushing noise, like gallons and gallons of water flying past him, a river of it, and it was starting to thrum and echo strangely, and he was afraid to move but he needed to know if this new entity was hostile or not. He turned his head slowly and his blood ran cold.

The dot wasn't green. But it wasn't red, either. *Because there was no dot*.

Will realized he was starting to hyperventilate but couldn't really do anything about it.

The previously quiet clicking had now turned to deliberate thuds, and as the green glow strengthened, Will saw a shadow start to congeal on the wall opposite the open tunnel.

His dangerously sped up breathing caught in his throat when he recognized what he was looking at.

No. That was impossible.

This was it, wasn't it? His mind had finally broken. It wasn't real. The shape of it, the sound it made as it walked. Even the light wasn't real.

But then, if it wasn't real, why was he now able to clearly read the sign, high up on the wall, that would have been missed otherwise? The one that told him his destination was almost *directly* to his left down the hall.

The direction he was about to run away from.

His inside calmed strangely, then. His brow furrowed and his eyes narrowed. He waited.

With a haughty snuff, the massive stag that now commanded the entire glowing hallway with its weightless bulk dreamily flowed into the junction and stopped, staring at the sign, as if reading it.

In unison, the strange man and the strange stag turned and looked at each other, one's face stoic and regal, the other's angry and haggard.

Will rationalized to himself that if this *was* a hallucination, it was a damn vivid one.

The stag was silent, yet its jet black fur (*was* it fur? It seemed so light, like feathers) flowed continuously in beautiful chaotic pulses in the stillness of the stagnant tunnel air.

Its body was inexplicably muscular and healthy, an impossibility for most wasteland wildlife, but from deep within its core, pulsing rhythmically as if powered by its very heart, a sickly dim green light ebbed and flowed in brightness and Will realized that was the sole source of light at the moment; he panicked slightly as he saw that his Pip-Boy screen had gone dark.

He calmed when he noticed his Pip-Boy functions were still in full effect, however:

Several red dots were now moving this way from his right, no doubt raiders that had heard the commotion of what had just happened and were on their way to investigate.

When Will turned back around, he discovered the stag had silently travelled further down the hallway in an instant, towards the reinforced door at the far end and past the sign, high on the wall, identifying the room behind the door as *Maintenance Mainframe Level A*.

Will bolted for the door, spurred on by the raised voices on the far end of the tunnel behind him, wondering just exactly how he was going to make it out of this one.

He rooted around in his mind for a moment.

Is there...anyone? *That can help me*? Will thought desperately to the void in his mind, but nothing budged.

Cursing, he slid by the stag that now seemingly guarded his back and practically slammed into the maintenance room door and immediately started examining the small monitor by the steel frame.

Tenpenny had given him the code, but that was only good if the panel itself had power running to it and was still in functioning order.

The faceplate was intact and all the buttons were present...but the light behind the screen was dead.

"I really relate to you, here, buddy, but that's also *really* fucking unhelpful," Will growled at the uncaring object.

He knew he could definitely pick the lock, but that would take time...and right now that was something he was currently running in the negatives with.

"Clip? You come down this way?" A gruff voice called out from the dark end of the hall.

Will realized suddenly that they couldn't see him. Which meant they also probably couldn't see the seven-foot-tall dimly glowing antlered horror that was now slowly and ominously approaching them.

As the buck and the raiders drew ever closer to one another, Will swallowed and tried to count the dots milling about in front of him. There were at least five of them. He guessed these guys were probably a little bit more seasoned than the bored teenage girl he had just taken out.

Will was trying to formulate literally any plan in his mind at all when the stag abruptly stopped and turned its majestic head back towards the direction of where Clip now lay in shambles and snorted in alarm.

Will's eyes narrowed for a split second before he and several of the raiders were violently knocked off their feet in a rolling shockwave explosion that rocked chaotically along the corridor and showered everything in a heavy dusting of the dirt and grime that had built up on the ceilings over the years.

Will thought maybe he had screamed as it happened, but if he had, it had been drowned out by everyone else's: the raiders were now trying to gather their meager wits and were mercifully scrambling back the way they had came, wobbling and disoriented, their confused shouts muffled as Will's ears rang and his head throbbed.

Relieved but not foolish, he lay as still as he could until the last red dot on his threat indicator had blipped out of range. Trying his best to stand, and mostly managing it, Will blinked painfully just as his Pip-Boy screen flickered back into life.

Suddenly, he remembered the stag. Stepping forward cautiously, he activated the wrist module's built-in flashlight and made his way to the intersection. Dust still floated in the air as a few waning indirect light sources weakly stuttered back into life here and there. But, as Will could now easily see, the hallway was empty.

There was no sign of the beast, nor was there any visible evidence it had ever truly been there in the first place.

It had essentially flashed out of existence when the explosion hit, it seemed.

And what in the hell was that, anyway? The blast, or blasts, plural, from the sound of it, had obviously come from the surface level, and it had definitely taken the raiders by surprise, meaning this wasn't exactly a common occurrence for them.

"Klaus...Klaus, what the fuck did you just do?" Will asked the ceiling in a horrified whisper.

His Pip-Boy's radar wasn't strong enough to penetrate the thick steel and earth that separated him from the street level, but he wondered how many red dots he would have seen just blink out of existence if it could.

The raiders were always horrible, he knew that. But he wondered how many of them would have chosen a different life if given the chance. If the world had been different. He wondered how many of the raiders were just good people in a bad place and time.

His chest burning, he slowly turned back to the maintenance door and studied the manual

lock panel. After a moment, he solemnly pulled out his new lock pick set from an inner jumpsuit pocket, tried his best to clear his mind, and got to work.

Roughly five minutes later, Will had located the processor, right where Tenpenny had assured him it would be in the shockingly pristine room, and as a bonus, he had even managed to grab some extra components he knew would sell for quite a few caps back in the marketplace.

He had nodded respectfully to the desiccated husk of a corpse seated in front of the control panel with a rusted gun at its feet and had said a silent thank you for the small ring of keys he had borrowed from it to make his escape easier.

He had just left the room and had started heading in the direction the raiders had stumbled (it was most likely the fastest way topside) when, unbelievably, another set of explosions rocked the tunnels and had once again sent Will tumbling to the floor in a heap.

This time, however, the bombardment had seemingly come from the direction he was currently headed, and even though it was around the same intensity as the blasts from last time, Will could easily tell it had come from much farther away.

In addition, a much more worrying factor presented itself immediately upon Will's recovery from this blast; the Geiger counter on his wrist had rattled angrily into life as the air above him sizzled.

He lay as flat to the ground as he possibly could, and breathed a sigh of relief as he watched the radiation level dip dramatically and quickly disappear. After a few seconds that lasted several minutes, he was able to shakily stand and observe that he hadn't actually even gotten dosed with enough rads to even cause him concern for the moment. It seemed they had built these tunnels to pretty high standards.

Still, he was going to have to have a word or two with Klaus's no doubt crispy remains, if he could ever manage to locate them.

His own body aching harshly, Will set off at a brisk jog down the hallway, guided only by the Pip-Boy light and his criminally misplaced optimism. He didn't have far to go, however, before he realized that the hallway was suddenly clogged with racks and boxes of junk and refuse: it formed a strange twisting canyon in the already cramped tunnel, and at the end, Will was both relieved and annoyed to find that there had been a well-lit and relatively clean (by raider standards) system of rooms right next to the area he had needed.

As much as he would have liked to explore this area thoroughly (he was darkly confident there were no red dots down here, and there was likely not going to be any in the immediate vicinity above him, either), every part of his mind and soul was screaming at him to get out of this place as fast as possible.

Consulting his Pip-Boy map, he carefully made his way south, piloting his course through the rooms partly on intuition, partly on educated guesswork, and eventually found a room with an exit symbol stamped boldly in green straight ahead of him.

Sure enough; a twin to the exit sign, this time in red, flickered dimly above the strangely thick and heavily barricaded door. Several different kinds of locks adorned the edge of the door and to Will's surprise, he saw several of them were still resolutely engaged.

Excitedly fishing out the key ring and comparing sizes and colors, he was able to get all but one unlocked, and Lucky was kind enough to help with that one, when it came down to it.

Taking a deep breath and steeling himself, Will flattened himself against the wall to the right of the door.

After a count of three, he gripped the doorknob, and felt his stomach turn immediately at the massive amount of heat it had absorbed from whatever had happened on the other side of

the thick steel.

After wrestling with the catch for a moment, the bolts clicked open with surprising ease.

The air outside was still and dark, and Will's senses were immediately assailed from all directions.

An acrid, hateful stench that he had only sensed vaguely up until now hit him like a brick to the face and made him retch violently.

Hot air washed in like spit and Will wondered if he wasn't trapped in here indefinitely as the city burned.

He could hear a faint cracking and peered around the doorframe to see that a body, still burning dully and twisted grotesquely, splayed out upside down on a set of chipped concrete stairs leading up a small incline to the street above.

Somehow, Will had ended up at a simple and convenient in-ground access door (Will consulted his map) on the northeast side of the city.

Creeping slowly out the door and past a very singed but still intact ancient sofa, Will waited patiently for his Pip-Boy map to update. Looking at the corpse in front of him on the stairs, it was obvious to Will from its position that whoever it had been, they had made a desperate crawl to the alcove for safety from whatever had happened and had been far too late.

Suddenly Will's map shifted from the underground tunnel network to the surface level street grid of the city. He rotated slowly and scanned for any dots- red or otherwise- and saw that he was completely alone.

At least for the moment. He cautiously creeped forward and observed the only recognizable thing left on the corpse: the shoes.

He exhaled suddenly in relief. The boots were rough looking and mismatched. This wasn't Klaus, at least.

Giving the body a wide berth, Will crept up the stairs and into the smokey, scorched air. It wasn't nearly as bad as Will had imagined, but that definitely wasn't saying much.

Visibility was limited, to say the least, and Will reckoned he could see about fifteen feet in front of him with any real clarity, but everything beyond that was an indistinct shape lost in the gray haze of ash. He had seen a charcoal drawing in a book like this once.

"*There are places up there that actually look that beautiful, can you believe it*?" Came Spadesy's low voice in his ear, echoing up to him from the past.

He wished he was here with him, now.

Besides the occasional creak and groan of metal falling or cooking somewhere far out of sight, the city was silent.

Will closed his eyes for a moment and marveled at the soft pattering of falling ash on the ground around him. When he opened them again, he saw that there was half of a car lodged into the side of the building across the street.

Several things made sense, now. The wasteland had no shortage of vehicles that used nuclear fusion as a power source.

Will had seen the fascinating effects of one combusting firsthand, already; he had used a grenade on what used to be a small delivery truck once as a diversionary tactic for a deathclaw that had been sniffing around his camp for too long.

A single vehicle could produce a devastating explosion that could easily set off a chain reaction; he couldn't imagine what kind of impact several going off at once would have.

But then again, it seemed he didn't have to.

Will turned in place and tried to see how far the damage extended. Was the whole city like this? He realized it was pointless. His business here was done.

Aiming himself south, he slowly and methodically worked his way down the avenue he had surfaced next to, taking extra care to avoid the flaming and mangled car husks that still emitted small amounts of radiation into the air.

Every now and then, he would encounter something that was very clearly piles of cooked meat strewn about among random blackened weapons and metal jewelry.
He tried his best not to look at them, but it was kind of hard given how scattered they were.

As he neared the edge of the city, a lone green dot winked into existence directly in front of him and he paused, wary.

He knew who it was. He wasn't scared, or anything. But he was curious as to how he was going to react to him when he saw him.

He stopped bothering to walk quietly and made his way towards the green dot, which had now started swaying slowly from side to side, signaling that Klaus had heard his footsteps and was coming to greet him now.

As they met in the mostly clear intersection, Klaus materialized out of the gloam like a ghost, his grey shawl and cloak the exact shade of the ash swirling about him.

Will slowly came to a stop several yards from the center of the junction and Hannibal politely did the same. They stared at each other for a moment. Then, finally:

"That's not exactly what I had in mind," Will growled darkly as something behind them in the city creaked and fell with a loud crash.
Hannibal smiled at the undisguised anger in
Will's voice.

"Well, perhaps you just weren't thinking with the right part of it," Hannibal offered reassuringly. Will ignored him.

"You...*blew up* an *entire city*?" Will croaked out flatly. Hannibal straightened slightly.

"Oh, no, of course not. I didn't have the time or the resources for such a feat. At most, I'd say I cleared out a good quarter of it, if that," he finished pragmatically.

Will's breaths were coming slowly and deliberately now, torn between gratitude and horror at what the other man had done.

"How many people did you just kill? I only wanted them distracted, not, not, *flash fried*!" he spat, motioning to a nearby smoking flesh pile.

Hannibal had the audacity to look wounded for a moment.

"I did try to avoid killing them, you know," he intoned across the divide. "I'm not a cold blooded murderer."

Will frowned. Wasn't he? That was, for the most part, all he had seen him do, up to this point.

"What exactly...did you do, then?" He asked begrudgingly. Just because he was pissed didn't mean he didn't have questions.

Hannibal shrugged. "I merely set off a chain reaction in the least active part of this side of the city, hoping it would drive any nearby raiders with any sense as far away as possible from this vicinity." He bowed forward slightly and gave Will a playfully admonishing smirk. "Not all distractions need be of the drawing variety."

Will calmed slightly. That seemed reasonable. It could almost make sense. But then, if so...

"Then what about the second set of explosions?" Will rumbled through the silt.

Then Hannibal's face changed, suddenly. It had been playful, welcoming when they had first reunited, as if this was a charming stroll and a chance meeting with an old friend on a calm summer evening.

But now his face was dark, terrifying in its malignant mirth. The smile suddenly seemed

sharp and alarming. As far apart as they still were, Will still felt the sudden urge to back up.

"I'm afraid some of the raiders had made the unfortunate decision to investigate the explosions instead of fleeing. I simply don't like repeating myself."

Will swallowed so loudly that he was certain the other man across the street had heard it. He closed his eyes for a moment and looked inward at all the rational parts of himself screaming warnings about this man (some even seemed to be waving little blood colored flags), considered them seriously for a moment, then quickly and flatly dropped the shades.

He thought of something a trader he had followed for a couple of days had told him one night while being drunk and extra maudlin:

"*Raiders are just what happens when the cage door to the people zoo gets left open*."

The man had been crazy and stupid on top of being drunk so Will had just told him to shut up and had then rolled him on his side so he wouldn't choke on vomit and had continued nervously watching for enemies with his Pip-Boy for the rest of the night.

Will, however, did unfortunately catch his drift. Humans were all shit and a tiger can't change its stripes.

"I killed a woman down there," was all he said, and opened his eyes.

To his surprise, the other man's face was solemn and focused as it peered at him through the gloom. It was clear he understood the weight of these words immediately. Will wasn't bragging. And he was grateful the other man knew it.

After a long pause, Hannibal looked down mournfully and sighed. "I'm sorry. I wish I had been quicker," he said lowly, gravely. In reality, his heart was suddenly beating rather fast. He was now looking at a man fresh from a fight for his life. He wondered momentarily if he could he still see the color high in his cheeks from the struggle.

Will was now walking towards Hannibal, closing the dusty gap between them but still exercising caution as he searched the man's face carefully, watching for the smallest hint of deception.

"No, I...no, *thank you*. For helping me. What happened to your lip? Did you get hurt?" He was now within feet of Hannibal and the taller man almost felt the urge to retreat himself for a moment, because beneath the tangled mass of curls and light dusting of grime, Will's eyes were now very strange. The intensity gave Hannibal the incredibly rare and unwanted sensation of being seen, and he only just managed to brush off his confusion in time to redirect it as apparent alarm for the younger man's own injury.

"I'm more concerned for you, presently. Is all that blood yours?" He asked as he indicated the clotted mess of Will's beard.

Will hadn't seen anything suspect on the man's face as he observed him but then again, he had never scored that highly on that sort of thing in the lab. The concern on his face seemed genuine enough, for the time being, however.

"Yes," was all he said, but didn't elaborate, much to Hannibal's immense disappointment.

He nodded supportively, anyway. "Once we get out of here, I'll take a look at it. I have no shortage of medical supplies at the moment. Who knew raiders were so proactive about their continued existence?"

Will laughed tiredly despite himself and smirked.

"Could have fooled the hell out of me."

Hannibal's eyes were soft and kind again.

They smiled at each other for a moment in the falling gray snow of the city and then Will shyly extended his hand for a second time.

"My name's Will, by the way. Will Graham," he offered simply.

The other man smiled but didn't hesitate.

“Doctor Hannibal Lecter. It’s a pleasure to meet you,” he said as he shook his hand slowly.

With that, and with nothing more to be said, the two men turned towards the south and walked silently side by side out of the ruined city.

Chapter End Notes

I’m very tired so there will probably be more editing later lol. I just wanted to get this posted.
Sorry this took so long, I ran out of the chemicals and also the world is like dying rn lol

Chapter soundtrack: Bat For Lashes - Glass

WTF even are Fallout Mechanics

Chapter Summary

switching out of ofmd mode
Eugh
switching into Hannibal mode
The Less I Know The Better starts playing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The two men had made it almost all the way out of the devastated ruins (they had been stealing furtive glances at each other for most of the way, until they awkwardly caught each other mid-glance, at which point they stopped) before Will had felt comfortable enough to voice a concern he had been agonizing over for at least the past half hour.

“By the way. You didn’t happen to see any mole rats running around on your...*task*, did you, Dr. Lecter?” Will asked nonchalantly as he made yet another slow turn to scan for enemies in all directions. Still clear.

“Please, call me Hannibal. I believe current events warrant at least a first name basis?” He looked back with a charming grin but Will remained silent and stone-faced for the moment. Hannibal wasn’t fooled, however. He could practically hear the conflict grinding behind Will’s tired eyes.

“Incidentally, no, I don’t believe I did. Are you in desperate need of food? I can offer you far better sustenance than charred mole rat meat, if you’ll allow me,” Hannibal finished graciously, as if this were his French villa and they were on some kind of strange business trip together.

“What? Of course I don’t want to eat one, they helped me get into the maintenance tunnels,” Will blurted out, slightly offended.

Hannibal stopped abruptly and did a slow turnabout to face Will.

“I’m sorry. They what?” He intoned, his face an unreadable mask.

Will was torn suddenly between feeling weirdly self-conscious about his new mole rat friends...and feeling viciously protective of his new mole rat friends. It’s not like he had named several of them already, or anything.

“If it hadn’t been for them, I probably wouldn’t have gotten as far as I did that quickly. They went underground with me, and I was wondering if maybe they made it out alive, too,” Will stated plainly.

Hannibal stared at the man a moment longer, fascinated.

“You mean to say you collaborated with them? Directly? As in, immediate interaction with the animals, themselves?” He asked slowly.

“Yes?” Was all Will offered. Then, after a slight pause, “what were they going to do, shun me for being in the Too Much Hair Club?”

Hannibal smiled at the cheek but didn’t take the situation any less seriously.

“More than likely they would favor you for it, for the nesting material it would provide. But no. Mole rats are, as far as I know, incredibly aggressive and territorial when it comes to humans. Even the scent of one near their burrows, or young, warrants immediate action on the part of the entire colony. I’d stay away from them, going forward, if I were you. It doesn’t take much for a single angry one to kill a full grown man.”

Will thought back to the pup (Ambrose) sniffing gently at his rough, scuffed knuckles.

His mind was suddenly racing again. Was Hannibal lying? Or was there something else wrong with him, now? He stood still a moment longer, his brow furrowed.

“They didn’t seem to want to hurt me, at all. They just seemed curious.” Then: “Maybe they just don’t like you?” He felt himself say with a sudden coy smile as he moved to walk past the enraptured Hannibal.

Hannibal’s stomach was desperately trying to right itself and he couldn’t help letting out a small appreciative laugh.

He was almost giddy with optimism at this point; this new potential subject had, so far, not tried to bite or stab him for the part in his hair. He had not tried to fight off imaginary pretzel geese and he had, as of yet, not tried to degenerate in front of him on a cellular level.

He seemed intelligent, he definitely had wit, and he had to be capable enough, at least, to have survived sitting in the warming tray while Hannibal had essentially turned an entire city into flambé on top of him.

The thing with the mole rats was a little weird, admittedly, but then again, who didn’t have a charming idiosyncrasy or two? The average vault, more often than not, turned out far worse results than an ethereally rugged young man that shared a strange affinity with cursed animals.

Will, on the other hand, was freaking out slightly. On top of finding out that he might just be the least threatening presence in the wasteland, he had just mouthed off to a man who had done nothing but help him so far.

The other man didn't seem to be too bothered by it, however. In fact, when Will looked back at Hannibal, the man was still smiling faintly and fondly at him.

Upon introspection, Will realized he was starting to sort of like this partnership thing. Even if it was on a pragmatic level.

Which is what he was telling himself this was until further notice.

However. He *had* kind of smiled quite a few times now, and it was nice not being able to see his chest pounding from fear out of the corner of his eye for a change. Maybe he owed Hannibal a little more than just trader's gratitude. After all, it's not every day a man blows up an entire city for you.

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They had managed to exit the ruins and climb back up the hill with no further incident and Will was surprised at the intensity of his relief to see his now relatively familiar bag folded up neatly and hidden securely under a rock near the two men's initial meeting spot.

He realized with a pang that this was the closest thing he had to coming home. He felt more lonely than ever, suddenly.

He had actually almost started to run towards his gear (embarrassing) when Hannibal stopped him with a firm hand across his chest. If he felt the sudden explosive beating this caused in said chest, the man showed no sign of it.

"If you could wait just a moment, please?" He said as he loped forward gracefully and approached the rock. He stooped down after a moment and started fiddling with the bottom of Will's bag, his head bowed in concentration.

Will heard a familiar clicking sound and understood suddenly. His blood ran cold. Hannibal turned up to face him with a sheepish grin.

"I'll have to beg your forgiveness again, I'm afraid. I gave you my word I would not go looking through your things, but I didn't think you would mind if I engaged a few switches on your behalf?" He said as he once again tilted his head coaxingly up at Will.

"Did you...did you just..." Will stammered out through numb lips.

Hannibal reached out and gingerly lifted Will's pack out of its hiding spot by the long canvas strap, making Will's insides jolt, slightly. Then, getting up with a slight groan, Hannibal approached Will curiously.

"Did I just disarm a mine trap that I had set in the unlikely event someone other than you or I would happen across your pack before our return? Yes. But you needn't worry so much, I'm very practiced," he said, flashing more teeth and extending Will's pack out towards him as if it weighed nothing.
~~~~

Will stood aghast for a moment longer. Then, trying very hard to control his rising anger:

"*Hhhhanibal*, what...what would have happened if...if I couldn't find you before I got to my pack?! *What if you had died in the city*?!" Will seethed, just managing to not yank his bag out of Hannibal's hand as he took it from him.

Hannibal smiled indulgently and side-stepped the other man.

"Me? No."

Will stood rooted to the spot in complete disbelief for a moment before carefully setting down his pack. Then he covered his eyes with his hands, more exhausted than angry, suddenly.

"And you knew for a fact you were going to find me?" Will exhaled slowly.

"I knew for a fact that you would find me. You know how to work that computer on your wrist better than most, I imagine," Hannibal said with a smile in his voice.

Finally Will turned to face Hannibal, who was now readjusting his clothing and gear in an almost shy manner, his silvery blonde hair shielding his face slightly. He gave Will a reassuring smile from under his pronounced eyebrows and that decided it for him.

"You know I'm from a vault, don't you? You've known all along," Will said lowly, expecting some kind of dramatic reaction.

Instead, Hannibal only smiled at him wider and nodded politely.

"Yes," he said simply.

Will blinked. That explained quite a bit.

"Is that the real reason you're helping me?"

Hannibal was now refreshing the dark patches around his eyes with a substance from a jar he had pulled from an inner pocket.

"I won't deny that it is one of many, yes. But my initial explanation was an honest one, I assure you. I will not lie to you, Will," he finished earnestly, now looking like a visage of death itself.

Hannibal had, in fact, lied to Will several times, so far. He had not, in fact, drawn as many raiders as he could away from the center of the city, as he had implied, but towards it, initiating an explosion that was not big enough to cause alarm, but just enough to peak some very stupid curiosities.

Once he was satisfied with the amount of raiders that he had accumulated around the general area as they looked for the source of the disturbance, he had set off the second, far more devastating explosion, stretching across several blocks and implementing numerous tightly packed knots of vehicles.

He had stood atop the tallest building in the city, basking in the distant glow and heat of his intricate and explosive art piece, his face lit beatifically as his hair and shawl were swept back in the wall of heated air caused by the shock waves.

He had closed his eyes and smiled blissfully as the sounds of roaring and crashing had finally faded away into the anguished screaming of those few raiders who were not fortunate enough to have been so close to an explosion that they were killed instantly.

More recently, he had lied about his goal with the mine trap. While it would have been doubly hilarious if a raider *had* indeed found Will's pack and set the trap off in its face, Hannibal had every intention for the mine to kill Will in the improbable event that he himself had met his own end in the city (embarrassing), or, more realistically, Will had decided to vacate the area without consulting him first.

While Will Graham seemed harmless enough, he wasn't about to let an outsider (particularly one who could prove to be more unstable and dangerous over time), anywhere near Abigail if he wasn't going to be there.

Another lie he had told him was that he would have gotten away with killing Cumtick. If Will had indeed been the one to have disposed of him, Hannibal would have found him in one way or another. Abigail had gotten her territorial nature from him, after all.

What he would have done to Will in the end was another story.

Presently, Will was now looking at him again in that strange intrusive way. Hannibal realized he was making an admirable attempt to perceive any obvious deception in his own face and body language and relaxed immediately. He had never had a problem there.

After a tense moment of unnervingly piercing blue eyes drilling relentlessly into him, he saw he had passed the test: Will's face softened dramatically behind his unruly facial hair as he released his held breath in a relieved sigh. Suddenly, his eyes were almost warm in comparison to before.

"Ok. Fine. As long as we're being honest with each other, I kinda feel like maybe dealing with Tenpenny...might be a little bit out of my league. I've been instructed to meet him at a spot just outside his tower for delivery. You seem to know a lot about him. Or at least know *of* him?" Will said as he raised his Pip-Boy screen to his face and squinted at it.

Unseen by Will, Hannibal's jaw jutted and his lips pouted dangerously, but his voice remained even and light.

"I know quite a bit about him, yes. I can provide any information you require. Would you perhaps like me to come along with you to the rendezvous point? If you don't think he'd object?"

Will looked up suddenly as relief and gratitude saturated his face and Hannibal basked in what must have been the first genuine smile he had received from him.

“Seriously? You would do that? It’s a bit out of the way...” he stammered, obviously unbothered about convincing him, his excitement painfully visible.

“While I do have pressing matters to attend to back on the ship, I wouldn’t mind a small divergence. I would never leave a friend in need. And I do believe we are fast becoming just that?” Hannibal said as he took a step closer to Will.

Will swallowed but managed not to flinch.

“I guess so. I really don’t know how to thank you at the moment,” Will said in a rush, almost breathless. His face was still glowing but it was obvious to Hannibal: it was going to be a long time before Will was going to be comfortable around him.

It was something they were going to have to work on, he supposed. In the meantime, he knew his words held weight when he asked a very solemn favor:

“You can easily repay me in kind by allowing me to attend to your cheek. It’s starting to bruise,” he said in a low voice. “I have plenty of medical supplies, now, in addition to the ones I had already brought along with me.”

He casually indicated a small clump of rocks under a small bush that Will was only just now noticing was actually Hannibal’s very well camouflaged gear and extra clothing he had deemed unnecessary on his own errand.

Dazzled slightly by this, Will smirked at him shyly, clearly impressed.

“Sure. Yes. Thank you,” he practically whispered.

Emboldened by this small victory, Hannibal moved briskly toward his own sparse belongings. He had once again started humming contentedly, not saying anything in case it changed the other man’s mind.

As Hannibal turned, however, Will’s smile faded and his eyes settled darkly onto the back of the other man’s head.

He honestly didn’t know if he had expected that to work. And in the end it had almost been too easy.

Hannibal had stated that he had several reasons for following Will out of perhaps one of the safest places in the wasteland, and while he knew one of them had to have something to do with his being a vault dweller, another was most likely the simple fact that he wanted to sabotage this exchange, somehow.

Not because he hated Will...but because the man hated Tenpenny.

Will had noticed it immediately. The way he said his name, the scoffing, the angry flicks of the eyes when he was mentioned.

Will was willing to give Hannibal half-credit for at least offering to give up any information he had on Tenpenny (which was apparently all of it) for Will’s own personal

advantage without hesitation. But the fact was, Hannibal had low-key just tried to manipulate him a moment ago. And it was in such a head-ass way.

Never mind that I essentially manipulated him into manipulating me, he thought bitterly as he adjusted his bag comfortably underneath his cloak (he had decided he had earned ownership of it by now).

He didn't know if he was proud of himself, or disgusted. He guessed it was both. Which was better than neither, he supposed.

When Hannibal returned to him, he gently handed Will a small canister of ointment that had a pungent medicinal scent that Will knew all too well. He sighed and applied the balm to his bruised and swollen cheek and snorted at the sudden and unnerving tingling it caused as it healed his wounds at an accelerated pace.

"My apologies if it's a bit strong. I make my own balm, you see. The base formula isn't quite up to standard for what I usually get up to," Hannibal said with a slight smirk. He caught the other man's eye and Will's stomach did another strange swoop.

Will said nothing as he handed the small jar back to the older man, but forced a small smile of gratitude that he didn't quite fully feel.

Not that he wasn't grateful. It was just getting harder and harder to shake the feeling that there was still something deeply, profoundly wrong, here.

If you think he isn't desperately hungry for something from you, you're a fool, said a somber voice in the back of his head.

Will realized suddenly that it was correct. There was something almost feverish in Hannibal's deliberate interactions with him; he had the vibe of someone going through the motions of practicing their most favorite hobby, only they were slightly too eager to get to their favorite part.

Hannibal was saying something now about getting back on the road to put some distance between them and any (very angry) surviving raiders, and Will agreed shyly, his smile broadening and getting a strangely predatory glance up and down his body that Hannibal made no effort to hide in return.

Will narrowed his eyes and snorted playfully.

He's done this before, said the voice in the back of his head. *So, so many times before.*

He's not going to do it to me, Will snapped back.

The voice tried to tell him morosely that they had all probably said that, but then Will summarily doused it in lighter fluid and lit it on fire.

He groaned appreciatively at a joke Hannibal had just made and even managed a witty retort as it burned darkly in his mind

Chapter End Notes

Always look at the success percentages for your speech checks, Hannibal lmfao gg

Sorry this chapter is so messy and short, it got deleted and rewritten twice (thanks Apple notes!) and I can't really remember if I included all the important stuff but I just needed to get it published and I'll work around it. Nothing has ever gone wrong with a plan like that and nothing ever will [Stede Bonnet Optimism].

End Notes

Guys this is going to be bumpy I don’t know how long I can hold off not taking this shit seriously

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